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McARTHUR

EMILY
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THE
Midwife's
CHRISTMAS
BABY



Mills & Boon M&B

Kate Hardy

The Midwife's Christmas Baby

«HarperCollins»

Hardy K.

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Precious Christmas Surprises When a night of passion leaves midwife Ella O'Brien pregnant with Oliver Darrington's baby she must learn to trust this dashing obstetrician. But Oliver's guarding his emotions. Can this baby help them to trust in their love this Christmas and become the family they really long for? Nine months after midwife Maeve's magical night with Rayne Walters she's preparing for the birth of her baby—alone. Rayne's arrest left Maeve reeling, and his refusal to reply to her letters in prison has left so many questions unanswered. Until he turns up... on Christmas Day! When a harmless Christmas house swap introduces Luci Dawson to gorgeous Dr Seb Hollingsworth suddenly a Christmas fling seems the perfect escape... until Luci realises this 'fling' is so much more and she knows exactly what she wants under her tree!

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The Midwife's Christmas Baby

The Midwife's Pregnancy Miracle

Kate Hardy

Midwife's Mistletoe Baby

Fiona McArthur

Waking Up to Dr. Gorgeous

Emily Forbes

MILLS & BOON

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THE MIDWIFE'S CHRISTMAS BABY

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EPILOGUE

About the Publisher

The Midwife's Pregnancy Miracle

Kate Hardy

Their precious Christmas surprise...

Midwife Ella O'Brien loves babies, but she believes she can't have her own. Until at a charity ball the chemistry between her and dashing obstetrician Oliver Darrington explodes into a night of passion that proves her wrong!

Aristocratic Oliver has been here before, but the baby wasn't his! Now he's guarding his emotions—even from lovely, innocent Ella. Can the baby they both want so much help them to trust in their love this Christmas...and become the family they really long for?

For Scarlet, Susanne and Tina—really enjoyed
working with you all on our quartet!

PROLOGUE

Hallowe'en

ALMOST AS IF someone had called his name, Oliver Darrington found himself turning round and looking at the doorway.

Ella O'Brien, one of the junior midwives from his department, was standing there. Despite the fact that she was wearing a mask that covered half her face—because tonight was the annual Hallowe'en Masquerade Ball, the glitziest fundraiser in the Royal Cheltenham Hospital's social calendar—he recognised her instantly.

Desire shimmered at the bottom of his spine and he dragged in a breath. He really needed to get a grip. Ella was his colleague. His friend. He'd been attracted to her since the very first moment she'd walked into Teddy's, the centre for birth and babies at the Royal Cheltenham Hospital. Her striking red hair, worn tied back in a scrunchie, had snagged his attention. Then he'd noticed her clear green eyes and the soft curve of her mouth. He'd wanted her immediately, though he'd held himself back. Since the fallout from dating Justine, Oliver didn't do serious relationships; plus he hadn't wanted to risk making things awkward on the ward between them, so he'd managed to keep things strictly professional between himself and Ella.

Though several times when they'd worked together, his hand had brushed against hers and it had felt as if he'd been galvanised. And sometimes he'd caught her eye and wondered, did she ever feel that same secret pull?

Though he'd dismissed it: Ella O'Brien was one of the most grounded and independent women he'd ever met. He knew she was dedicated to her career and she wasn't the type to let herself be distracted by a fling—which was all he could offer. Besides, over the last eighteen months, he'd discovered that he liked Ella: she was easy to work with, being both sharply intelligent and yet able to empathise with the mums on the unit. He didn't want to risk spoiling that.

But tonight...

Tonight was the first time he'd ever seen her all dressed up, and it threw him. At work, Ella wore uniform or scrubs, and on team nights out she'd always dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt. Oliver couldn't quite square the no-nonsense midwife he was used to with the woman in the navy satin prom dress. Her dress had a sweetheart neckline and was drawn in sharply at the waist to highlight her curves before flaring out again to the knee, and she was wearing high heels which made her legs look incredibly long. She looked utterly gorgeous. Right at that moment, Oliver really wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her until they were both dizzy.

'Stop being so shallow, Darrington,' he chided himself.

And then he realised that Ella had hesitated in the doorway; she was clearly scanning the room, trying to work out where the rest of the team was. For just a moment, she looked vulnerable—which was odd for someone who was always so confident and cheerful at work. And that look of uncertainty made him go straight to her rescue.

'Good evening, Ella. You look lovely,' he said as he joined her in the doorway.

Her fair Irish skin turned a delicate shade of pink. 'Thank you, Oliver. But you're not supposed to recognise me with a mask on, are you?'

'Your hair's a tiny bit of a giveaway.' That glorious dark red. And tonight it was in a sophisticated updo, with a few loose, soft curls framing her face, making him want to release the pins and let it fall like silk onto her shoulders... Oh, for pity's sake. Now was definitely not the time to start fantasising about her. He forced himself to concentrate. 'So how did you recognise me?' he asked.

'Your voice is pretty distinctive.'

As was hers, with that soft Irish accent. 'Fair cop,' he said easily. 'The rest of the team from Teddy's is over there.' He gestured in the direction of their table. 'Come and have a glass of champagne.'



Even though Oliver was a good six inches taller than she was, Ella noticed that he kept his stride short to match hers as they skirted round the edge of the dance floor. She was really grateful; the last thing she wanted to do was to make a fool of herself by walking too fast and tripping over in her unfamiliar high heels. Especially here, at such a glamorous do. Right now, she felt seriously out of her depth. She'd never really been much of a one for parties and balls; at university, she'd missed out on most of the big events, because she'd been concentrating so hard on her studies. It had been such a struggle to get to university in the first place, she hadn't wanted to jeopardise her career by partying when she should've been studying. And it was one of the reasons why she was still a virgin at the age of twenty-six: she'd concentrated on her studies rather than on serious relationships. Part of her felt ridiculously self-conscious about it; in this day and age, it was so old-fashioned to still be a virgin. Yet, at the same time, she felt that sex ought to mean something. She didn't want to have a one-night stand with someone just for the sake of it.

Last year, she'd been on duty so she hadn't been able to make it to the famous Royal Cheltenham Masquerade Ball; this year, she was off duty so she didn't have a good excuse to avoid it. But either Oliver hadn't noticed that she was a bit flustered, or he was too sensitive to make an issue of it. He simply chatted to her as they crossed the dance floor to join the rest of the team.

Ella, you look lovely.

Typical Oliver: charming and kind. It was one of the skills that made him popular to work with on the ward, because he always managed to make their mums-to-be feel more at ease and stop worrying. Just as he was clearly trying to put her at her ease now.

Ella had worked with the consultant for the last eighteen months; although she'd been instantly attracted to him, she'd been very careful not to act on that attraction. Although there had been moments when they'd accidentally touched at work and it had made her feel as if her heart was doing a backward flip, and sometimes she'd caught his eye in an unguarded moment and wondered if he felt that same pull, she hadn't acted on it because Oliver Darrington was way, way out of her league. According to the hospital grapevine, the string of women he dated all looked like models or had aristocratic connections; no way would he be interested in a junior midwife who came from a very ordinary family in County Kerry. So she'd kept things strictly professional between them at work, not even confessing to her best friend Annabelle how much she liked Oliver.

And she'd be strictly professional tonight, too.

Which was a real effort, given how gorgeous Oliver looked right now. He usually wore a suit to work, but she'd never seen him wearing evening dress before. He reminded her of Henry Cavill in his *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* role: tall and handsome, debonair even, with his dark hair perfectly groomed. Except Oliver's eyes were grey rather than blue, and his mouth was even more beautiful than the actor's...

Get a grip, Ella O'Brien, she told herself, and she managed to smile and say the kind of things everyone expected to hear when she and Oliver joined the rest of the team.

The warmth of their welcome dispelled the remainder of her nerves, and she found herself chatting easily.

'Dance with me?' Oliver asked.

This was the stuff dreams were made of: waltzing around a posh ballroom with Oliver Darrington.

Except Ella couldn't dance. She'd always been horribly clumsy. The only thing that she was worse at than dancing was spelling, thanks to her dyslexia. And she'd spent so many years as a child

believing that she was stupid and slow and hopeless at everything that she didn't trust herself not to make a mess of dancing with Oliver.

'I should warn you that I have two left feet,' she said. 'And I've never danced to this sort of music.' She gestured to the jazz trio on the stage. 'I've only ever watched Strictly Come Dancing on the telly. So on your head—or toes—be it, if you really want me to dance with you. But now's your chance to escape with all your toes unbruised.'

'You won't bruise my toes.' He smiled. 'Just follow my lead and it'll be fine.'

Was it really going to be that easy? Ella didn't share his confidence. At all.

But then Oliver led her onto the dance floor and they actually started dancing together.

It felt like floating on air. The way he guided her meant that she was moving in the right direction and her feet were always in the right place. And she'd never, ever experienced anything so magical. It was even better than she'd dreamed. Right at that second she felt like a fairy-tale princess in her swishy-skirted dress, dancing with the handsome prince. And she loved every moment of it. Being in his arms felt so right—as if this was where she'd always belonged. It made her feel warm and safe and cherished; yet, at the same time, there was the slow, sensual burn of attraction, dangerous and exciting.

Oliver danced with her for three songs in a row; and she was greedy enough to want to dance with him all night. Except this was the hospital's charity ball and Oliver was a consultant. He should be mixing, like the rest of the senior staff.

'Shouldn't you be—well—dancing with someone else?' Ella asked, feeling guilty both for being selfish and for wanting Oliver all to herself.

His eyes glittered behind his mask. 'No. It's up to me to decide who I dance with—and I want to dance with you.'

Her heart skipped a beat. Was Oliver telling her that he'd noticed her, the way she'd noticed him over the last few months? That for him, too, this had been building up for a long time? Or was she misreading him and hoping for too much?

'Though would you rather be dancing with someone else?' he asked.

'No, no—not at all.' Though she rather thought that Oliver might have spoiled her for dancing with anyone else, ever again. Not that she was going to admit that to him.

'Good.' He kept her in his arms, and Ella's pulse went up a notch as they moved round the dance floor.



Oliver knew he shouldn't be doing this. He'd meant to dance with Ella once, to be polite and friendly, then keep his distance.

The problem was, he really liked the feel of her in his arms. Which again was ridiculous, because Oliver didn't do proper relationships. Not since Justine. He was well aware that the hospital grapevine had labelled him a heartbreaker, a playboy who had an endless string of one-night stands. There was a grain of truth in the rumours, because he never got involved with anyone for the long term; but he really wasn't a heartbreaker and he was picky about who he slept with. He always made sure that every woman he dated knew the score right from the start: that it was just for fun, just for now and not for always. He definitely didn't leave a trail of broken hearts behind him, because that would be unkind and unfair.

But there was something about Ella that drew him. A simplicity of heart, maybe?

Which was precisely why he ought to make an excuse and get her to dance with someone else. Put some space between them until his common sense came back. He didn't want to mess up their working relationship. Even though right now he really, really wanted to dance her into a quiet corridor and kiss her until they were both dizzy.

Then he became aware that she was speaking and shook himself. 'Sorry, Ella. I was wool-gathering. What did you say?'

She gave him the sweetest, sweetest smile—one that made his heart feel as if it had just turned over. ‘Nothing important.’

‘I guess I ought to stop monopolising you and let you dance with someone else,’ he said.



Which was Oliver being nice and taking the blame for her social mistakes, Ella thought. ‘Yes,’ she agreed. She kept the bright smile pinned on her face as they went back to join the rest of the team. Then Charlie Warren, one of the other doctors from Teddy’s, asked her to dance. Although Charlie was usually quite reserved, his offer was genuine enough, so she accepted.

‘So are you enjoying the ball, Ella, or here under sufferance like me?’ Charlie asked.

‘I’m enjoying myself.’ In fact, much more than she’d expected to. Though she had a nasty feeling that Oliver was the main reason for that. ‘I’m sorry you’re not.’

‘I never do, really,’ Charlie began, then grimaced when she trod on his toes.

‘Sorry,’ she said instantly. ‘I’m afraid I have two left feet.’

‘I thought all Irish people were supposed to be natural dancers? I guess you have Riverdance to blame for that.’ It was an attempt at humour, as he was obviously trying to make polite conversation, but for as long as Ella had known Charlie, he’d always been distant with everyone at work. Quite the lone wolf.

‘Sadly, that gene bypassed me,’ she said. ‘I’m more Flatfeet than Flatley.’

‘I think my toes have already worked that one out for themselves but, even though we’re no Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, you look lovely tonight, Ella.’

‘Thank you,’ she said smiling. ‘I think you look more like James Bond than Fred Astaire anyway.’

‘You’re very sweet, Ella.’ He gave her a shy half-smile. ‘And you’ve made an otherwise dull evening much nicer.’

Ella found herself going through a similar routine with the colleagues she danced with from the Emergency Department.

‘You know, we’re going to have to set up a special broken toe department in the unit, just for the men you’ve danced with tonight,’ Mike Wetherby teased.

‘So I’d be better off sticking to delivering babies than dancing, hmm?’ she teased back, knowing that he meant no harm by the comment.

‘You can dance with me any time you like, Ella O’Brien,’ Mike said. ‘As long as I have fair warning so I can put on my steel-toe-capped boots first.’

She just laughed. ‘In steel-toe-capped boots, you’d be clomping around the dance floor as badly as me.’

‘Then we’d be the perfect match.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

And then Oliver rested his hand on Ella’s shoulder. ‘The next dance is mine, I believe.’

The warmth of his fingers against her bare skin sent a shaft of pure desire through her. She reminded herself crossly that this was a charity ball and Oliver had danced with at least half a dozen other women. He’d treated them in just the same way that he’d treated her, with courtesy and gallantry, so she was kidding herself and setting herself up for disappointment if she thought that his behaviour towards her tonight was anything more than that of a colleague. And she wasn’t going to embarrass herself by throwing herself at him and being turned down.

Was it wishful thinking or did the lights actually dim slightly as they moved onto the dance floor?

Oliver drew her closer, and she shivered.

‘Cold?’ he asked.

'No, I'm fine,' she said, not wanting him to guess that her reaction had been something so very different.

He pulled back slightly and looked her in the eye. For a second, Ella could've sworn that the same deep, intense yearning she felt was reflected in his eyes. But that had to be imagination or wishful thinking. Of course he didn't feel like that about her. Why would he?

She stared at his mouth, wondering for a crazy second what it would be like if Oliver kissed her. It must be that second glass of champagne affecting her, she thought, vowing to stick to water for the rest of the evening.

But dancing with Oliver was headier than any amount of champagne. And she noticed that, although she'd been clumsy with her other partners, with Oliver she didn't seem to put a foot wrong. Dancing with him made her feel as if someone had put a spell on her—but a nice spell, one that made her feel good.

And when he drew her closer still, she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Just for these few moments, she could believe that she and Oliver were together. Just the two of them, dancing cheek to cheek, with nobody else in the room. Just them and the night and the music...

At the end of the evening, Oliver said casually, 'I think you're on my way home, Ella. Can I give you a lift?'

The sensible thing to do would be to smile politely and say thanks, but she'd be fine—though she hadn't remembered to book a taxi, and there was bound to be an enormous queue so she'd have to wait for ages in the cold. It was a twenty-minute drive from here to her flat. She could manage that without making a fool of herself and throwing herself at Oliver, couldn't she?

'Thank you. That's very kind of you,' she said. 'It'll save me having to wait ages for a taxi.'

'Pleasure,' he said. 'Shall we go?'

She walked with him to his car. It was icy outside, and the thin wrap she'd brought did nothing to protect her from the cold.

'Here,' he said, shrugging out of his jacket and sliding it across her shoulders.

'But you'll be cold,' she protested.

'Not as cold as you,' he said.

Typical Oliver: gallant and charming. But she appreciated the warmth of his jacket, and tried not to think about the fact that it had been warmed by Oliver's body heat.

Just as she'd half expected, his car was sleek and low-slung. When he opened the door for her, Ella nearly tripped getting in and was cross with herself for being so stupid and clumsy.

'Ella, relax. There aren't any strings. This is just a lift home,' he said.

More was the pity, she thought, and was even crosser with herself for being such an idiot.

'Sorry. Too much champagne,' she fibbed.

When she fumbled with the seat belt, he sorted it out for her. Her skin tingled where his fingers brushed against her.

Stop it, she told herself. He doesn't think of you in that way. And you're too busy at work to get involved with anyone—especially a colleague who apparently never dates anyone more than twice. Keep it professional.

'What's your postcode?' he asked.

She told him and he put it into the sat nav. Then he switched on the stereo and soft classical music flooded the car. 'Do you mind this?' he asked. 'I can change it, if you like.'

'No, it's lovely. I like piano music,' she said. 'We have a piano at home.'

'You play?'

'No, Mam does. I meant home in Ireland, not here,' she said. 'Mam's a music teacher. She plays the piano at school in assembly and in the Christmas Nativity plays for the little ones.'

'Did you ever think about being a teacher?' he asked.

‘No.’ Everyone had thought that little Ella O’Brien was very sweet but not very bright, and would never get through her exams. Until the new biology teacher had started at her school when Ella was fifteen, worked out that Ella was dyslexic rather than stupid, and batted her corner for her. ‘I always wanted to be a midwife, like my Aunty Bridget.’ Everyone had thought that Ella was being a dreamer when she’d said what she wanted to do, but she’d put in the effort and worked so hard that she’d managed to get through her exams with good enough grades to get a place in London to train as a midwife. ‘It’s so special, sharing those first few minutes of a new life coming into the world.’ She paused. ‘What about you? Did you always want to be a doctor?’

‘Yes.’ Though there was something slightly shuttered in Oliver’s voice, and Ella wondered if he’d had the same kind of struggle she’d had about her choice of career. Although her parents supported her now, they’d worried throughout the whole of her degree and her training as a midwife, even though her tutors knew about her dyslexia and were really supportive. Her parents had told her all the time that she ought to give it up and come home to Ireland—particularly when she’d had her operation for a ruptured ovarian cyst and fallen behind in her studies. Thankfully Ella had been stubborn about it, and her parents had eventually come to terms with the fact that she was staying in England. She tried to make it home for a visit every couple of months, as well as video-calling them at least once a week through her laptop. And nowadays she knew her parents were more proud of her than worried about her.

Oliver didn’t elaborate on his comment, and she felt too awkward to ask anything more. Particularly as she was so physically aware of him sitting next to her.

Well, she was just going to have to be sensible about this. But, when he pulled up on the road outside her flat, her mouth clearly wasn’t with the programme, because she found herself saying, ‘Thank you for the lift. Would you like to come in for a coffee?’



This was where Oliver knew that he was supposed to say no. Where he was supposed to wish Ella goodnight, wait until she was safely indoors and then drive away. But he discovered that his mouth wasn’t working in partnership with his common sense, because he found himself saying yes and following her into her flat.

Her tiny flat was on the ground floor in one of the pretty Regency squares in Cheltenham.

‘Come and sit down.’ She ushered him into the living room. ‘Black, one sugar, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Thanks.’

‘I’ll be two seconds,’ she said, and disappeared off to what he presumed was her kitchen.

He glanced around the room. There was enough space for a small sofa, a bookcase full of midwifery texts, and a very compact desk where there were more textbooks and a laptop. It looked as if Ella spent a lot of time outside work studying.

There was a framed photograph on the mantelpiece of her at graduation with two people who looked enough like her to be her parents, plus several others of a large group of people in a garden. Clearly she was at some family party or other, and everyone seemed to radiate love and happiness. Oliver felt a momentary pang. His own family wasn’t like that, though perhaps part of that was his own fault for distancing himself from them. He could hardly be close to his brother while avoiding his parents, though; and when he saw his parents he was always on the receiving end of their disappointment.

Sometimes he thought that most parents would’ve been proud of their son for sticking through fourteen years of training and qualifying as an obstetrician. But the Darringtons had had rather different expectations for their son...

He really ought to make his excuses and leave. Ella was the last person he should get involved with. Apart from the fact that she was obviously much closer to her family than he was to his, she was his colleague and he didn’t want things to get messy at work. Nothing could happen between them.

But when he went into her small kitchen to tell her that he needed to go, she turned round and smiled at him and all his common sense fled. Her beautiful green eyes held him spellbound. And right at that moment he felt the strongest connection to her. Her mouth looked warm and sweet and soft, and he really wanted to kiss her. When his gaze flicked up to her eyes again, he realised that she was doing exactly the same: looking at his mouth. So was she, too, wondering...?

Instead of saying goodnight, he stepped forward and brushed his mouth very lightly against hers—just as he'd wanted to do all evening. Not just all evening, if he was honest with himself: he'd wanted to kiss her for weeks and weeks and weeks.

Every nerve-end in his lips tingled, so he couldn't stop himself doing it again.

And this time she kissed him back.

'Ella,' he said when he broke the kiss. 'I've wanted to do that for months.'

'Me, too,' she whispered.

So she'd noticed him in the same way?

His common sense made a last-ditch bid to extract him. 'We shouldn't do this.'

'I know—we work together and we ought to be sensible,' she agreed.

'Exactly,' he said, relieved that he hadn't quite ruined their working relationship by giving in to that mad urge to kiss her. They could still salvage a professional friendship after tonight.

But then she rested her hand against his cheek. Her touch was light and gentle, and he found himself twisting his head to kiss her palm.

Her beautiful green eyes darkened.

Then the kissing started all over again, this time in earnest, and Oliver forgot all his good intentions. He loosened her hair, the way he'd wanted to do all evening, and let it tumble down to her shoulders.

Her eyes widened. 'Oliver!'

'I know.' He kissed her again. 'But I can't help this—I really want you, Ella. I have done since the first time I met you.'

'Me, too,' she said.

His whole body tingled with desire. She wanted him as much as he wanted her?

'So what are we going to do about this?' she asked.

'Right now, I can't think straight,' he admitted. 'I just want to make love with you.'

For a moment, he thought she was going to back away. But then she inclined her head very slightly and took his hand to lead him to her bedroom.

'Are you sure about this?' he asked softly as she switched the bedside light on.

'I'm sure,' she said, her voice low and husky.

He kissed her, and it made his head spin. Hardly able to believe this was happening, he slid the zip down at the back of her dress. Seconds later, he stroked the material away from her shoulders and it fell to the floor.

She undid his bow tie, then unbuttoned his shirt with shaking fingers, smoothed the material off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor next to her dress.

He unsnapped her bra. 'You're beautiful. All curves.'

She gave him a shy smile. 'You're beautiful, too. All muscles.'

And suddenly the faint awkwardness was gone—there was just Ella, kissing her, and feeling the warmth of her skin against his.

Oliver wasn't sure which of them finished undressing whom, but the next thing he knew he was kneeling between her thighs and her hair was spread over the pillows, just as he'd imagined it.

And then he stopped. 'Protection. I don't have a condom.'

'You don't need one,' she said, flushing slightly.

So she was on the Pill? Part of him remembered Justine's treachery and the repercussions. But he knew that Ella wasn't like Justine. The woman he'd got to know over the last eighteen months was

open and honest. She wasn't going to cheat on him with someone else, get pregnant, and then try to make him believe that the baby was his. He knew that without having to ask.

'Oliver?' She looked worried, now. 'I don't sleep around. I'm not...' The colour in her cheeks deepened. 'You know.'

'I know.' He stroked her face. 'And the rumours about me aren't true. I don't have sex with every single woman I date.' He shouldn't be having sex with Ella, either; but right now her skin was warm against his, this had been a long time coming, and he wanted to do this more than he'd wanted to do anything in years.

'I know,' she said, and kissed him.

That kiss made him relax with her, and he slowed the pace down, wanting to explore her. He kissed and stroked his way down her body, starting with a dip beneath her collarbones and paying attention to exactly what made her sigh with pleasure, from the curve of her inner elbow to the soft undersides of her breasts, then starting with the hollows of her anklebones and feathering his way upwards until she was making tiny, involuntary noises and clutching at his shoulders.

'Now?' he asked softly.

'Now.' Her voice was raspy and husky with desire. Which was exactly what he'd wanted.

As he eased into her, he felt her tense.

'OK?' he asked.

She nodded. 'I just never thought it would be like...'

Her words slammed into his brain and he realised the implication of what she'd just said.

Ella was a virgin. And he'd just taken her virginity.

Oh, hell. But it was too late now. He couldn't reverse what he'd done. All he could do was try to make this as good for her as he could.

'Oliver?' And now she looked panicky. As if she thought she'd done something wrong.

It wasn't her. He was the one in the wrong. He should've thought. Should've checked. Should've walked away, instead of giving in to that desperate need to be close to her.

'You're beautiful,' he said, staying perfectly still so her body would have the time and space to get used to him, and kissed her. Because then he wouldn't have to talk and make a mess of things.

Slowly, she relaxed again, and kissed him back. And he paid close attention, finding out what made her whimper with desire, taking it slowly until he finally felt her body rippling round his and it tipped him into his own climax.

He held her close. 'Ella. I feel so guilty about this.'

'Don't. You didn't do anything wrong.' She stroked his face.

'But you were a—'

'Virgin. I know.' She bit her lip. 'Which is so stupid in this day and age. It makes me feel... Well, who on earth is still a virgin at the age of twenty-six?' She grimaced.

He knew the answer to that. 'A woman who's waiting for the right person.'

'There's no guarantee that Mr Right will ever come along.'

Or Ms Right. She had a point.

And right now she was clearly embarrassed by the situation, because her fair skin was flushed.

'I'm not judging you,' he said awkwardly. 'Ella, you're lovely.'

The 'but' was a mile high in flashing neon letters, and she obviously saw that straight away. 'But you don't do relationships,' she said. 'I know.'

'I'm sorry. I should go.' He dragged in a breath. 'But at the same time I don't want to leave you. I don't want to leave it messy like this.'

'I'm not expecting anything from you, Oliver.'

But he'd seen the flicker of disappointment in her eyes before she'd managed to hide it. She'd just given him her virginity. To simply walk away from her immediately after that would make him feel like a real lowlife.

Plus he didn't actually want to go. Having Ella in his arms felt so right.

'Can I stay for a bit and just—well, hold you?' he asked.

'Why?'

One answer slammed into his head, but he wasn't ready to consider that. He took a deep breath. 'Because I feel horrible. I can't just get up and leave you. I just took your virginity, Ella.'

'That isn't an issue.'

He rather thought it was. 'I feel bad about it.'

'Don't. It was my choice.' She paused. 'But you don't want a relationship with me.'

Trust Ella to hit the nail on the head instead of avoiding the issue. His no-nonsense colleague was back. 'It's not you. It's anyone.' He raked a hand through his hair. 'I've got an interview for the Assistant Head of Obstetrics job next week. If I get the post, then all my attention's going to be on my new job. It's the wrong time for me to get involved with anyone.'

'And I'm not your type anyway.'

Actually, she was exactly his type, warm and sweet and lovely; though his family wouldn't agree with him. His brother would be fine, but his parents would see her as the girl from a very different background—an unsuitable background. Not that anyone at work knew about his family. He'd been careful to keep his background very quiet. The fact that his father had a title had absolutely nothing to do with Oliver's ability to do his job, and he wanted people to judge him for himself, not for whose son he was.

He took her hand. 'Ella. I like you a lot. I respect you. And I've been attracted to you ever since the first time I met you. What happened tonight...I think it's been a long time coming.'

'It has.'

So she felt that weird, almost elemental pull, too?

'But we're not going to repeat it.'

He couldn't tell a thing from her expression or from the tone of her voice. Everything was neutral. 'It's not you, Ella. It's me.' The last thing he wanted was for her to take the blame. He knew the whole thing was his fault. He should've kept himself under his usual control.

'As far as everyone else is concerned, you gave me a lift home from the ball—as your colleague—and you stayed for a cup of coffee,' she said. 'And that's it.'

'Thank you.' She really was letting him off the hook—and it was a lot more than he deserved.

'If you, um, need the bathroom, it's next door. The towels are clean. Help yourself to anything you need.'

'Thanks.' He pulled on his underpants and padded to the bathroom.

When he returned from his shower, with the towel still wrapped round his waist, she'd changed into a pair of pyjamas. Totally unsexy striped flannel pyjamas that buttoned right up to the neck.

And how bad was it that he wanted to unbutton them and slide the material off her skin again? To kiss every centimetre of skin he uncovered and lose himself in her warmth?

Then again, those pyjamas were also a statement. She was dressed—and he was wearing only her bath towel. 'Do you want me to go?' he asked.

'I think it would be best,' she said.

He knew she was right, and that leaving would be the sensible thing to do, but he still felt bad. As if he should've stayed a bit longer, and at least held her until she fell asleep. Going now felt as if he was deserting her.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'I'm not.' She lifted her chin. 'We did nothing to be ashamed of.'

He had. He'd taken her virginity without a second thought. But if he pressed the issue, he had a feeling she'd take it the wrong way and think he was ashamed about sleeping with her—that she was the problem, not him. Which wasn't true.

‘Uh-huh,’ he said awkwardly. Normally he was good with words, but tonight that ability had completely deserted him. ‘Ella—we’ve worked together well for eighteen months. I don’t want that to change.’

‘It won’t. Nobody at the hospital needs to know anything about what just happened.’

She didn’t meet his eye, he noticed. So that comment about not being ashamed had obviously been sheer bravado.

‘I’m not a good bet when it comes to relationships, Ella,’ he said softly. Though he didn’t want to tell her why. How stupid was he not to have realised that Justine had been seeing someone else, and that he was her golden ticket to the good life for her and the baby that wasn’t his? He knew that Ella wasn’t a gold-digger, the way Justine had been; but he still couldn’t face taking a risk with a relationship again. Making another mistake. Having his heart trampled on again. So it was better to stay exactly as he was, where everyone knew the score and that all his relationships were just for fun.



Not a good bet when it comes to relationships.

Neither am I, Ella thought ruefully.

What did she have to offer anyone? Thanks to the endometriosis that had dogged her for years and caused the ovarian cyst to grow and rupture, Ella couldn’t have children. It was one of the reasons why she’d avoided relationships; what was the point of starting anything when you knew you were taking someone’s future choices away? Who would want a wife who couldn’t give him a family? She’d seen first-hand from her own best friend’s experience how the pressure of infertility could cause even the strongest marriage to crack.

So she knew she was better off as she was. She’d come to terms with the situation over the last few years; now she had the chance to concentrate on her job and prove that she was better than her grades at university suggested—that she was worthy of her job. And her job would be enough for her.

‘I don’t want a relationship with you, Oliver,’ she said. It wasn’t strictly true, but she wasn’t stupid enough to long for something she knew she couldn’t have. ‘Except a working one.’

The relief in his expression was so dazzling, it almost blinded her.

Well, she could be just as bright and chirpy. She wasn’t going to let him see how much his relief had hurt her. ‘Shall I make you a cup of tea while you’re getting dressed?’

‘No, it’s fine, thank you. I’d probably better go.’

‘I’ll, um, let you get changed,’ she said, and headed for the kitchen to give him some space.

The two mugs of instant coffee—never made—sat accusingly in front of the kettle. She tipped the coffee granules in the bin, rinsed out the mugs and made herself a strong cup of tea. Mam’s solution to everything, she thought wryly. Though she had a feeling that it would take an awful lot more than a cup of tea to sort this out.

She’d just have to pretend that tonight had never happened. And hopefully things wouldn’t be awkward between Oliver and her at work.

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday 3rd December

'EXCUSE ME, PLEASE. I'll be back in a second.' Ella held her breath and made a dash for the door. This was hardly professional behaviour, but it would be better than throwing up in front of the poor mum-to-be and her partner.

She made it to the staff toilet with seconds to spare. And then, weirdly, as she leaned over the bowl, she stopped feeling sick.

Huh?

If she was coming down with the sickness bug that was sweeping its way through the hospital and leaving all the departments short-staffed, she should've been throwing up right now. Big time. But the queasiness that had left her feeling hot and sweaty in the consulting room seemed to have vanished.

She frowned. The last thing she'd been aware of was how strong the dad-to-be's aftershave had been.

Sensitive to smells and feeling sick...

Had any other woman listed those symptoms, Ella would've suspected early pregnancy. But she knew that she couldn't possibly be pregnant. Her doctor had given her the bad news more than five years ago, after her ovarian cyst had ruptured. Between the cyst and the endometriosis that had dogged Ella and caused her to fall behind in her studies, her Fallopian tubes were in a bad way and she'd been told she'd never have children of her own.

How ironic that she'd specialised in midwifery. Cuddles with a baby she'd just delivered, or with a friend's or cousin's child, were all she would ever have. But after a lot of heartache and tears she'd come to terms with the situation. She loved her job. Trying to find a Mr Right who wouldn't mind that she couldn't ever give him a baby of his own—well, that was just being greedy and expecting too much.

She splashed water on her face, took a deep breath and returned to the consulting room to finish the antenatal appointment with her parents-to-be.

But when exactly the same thing happened at her next antenatal appointment, Ella began to wonder quite what was going on.

She and Oliver hadn't used protection, the night of the Hallowe'en masked ball. But she'd thought it wouldn't matter.

Of course she wasn't pregnant. She couldn't be.

As for the fact that her bra felt a bit too tight and her breasts felt slightly sore... That was purely psychological. Her imagination was simply running riot and coming up with other pregnancy symptoms. There was no way this could be a miracle baby. No way at all.

But, now she thought about it, her period was late. A quick mental count told her that it was two and a half weeks late. She hadn't had time to notice because they'd been so short-staffed and busy in the department lately. Actually, that was probably the reason why her period was late in the first place; she'd been rushed off her feet and working crazy hours, so it wasn't surprising that her menstrual cycle was protesting.

'Ella O'Brien, you're being a numpty,' she told herself crossly. 'Of course you're not pregnant.' All the same, during her break she took one of the pregnancy test kits from the cupboard. Just to prove to herself once and for all that she was being ridiculous, and then she could get on with the rest of her life.

She peed on the stick, then waited.

A blue line appeared in the first window, to show that the test was working properly.

And then, to her shock, a blue line appeared in the second window.

But—but—this couldn't be happening. It couldn't. How could she possibly be pregnant?

She sat there staring at the test, in turmoil, emotions whirling through her.

The test result was clear: she was expecting a baby. The one thing she'd been told would never happen, by specialists she'd trusted absolutely. From what they'd said, the odds were so stacked against her falling pregnant, she'd have more chances of winning a huge prize on the lottery.

Though in some ways this felt better than winning the lottery. A baby. The gift she'd never dreamed she'd ever be able to have, except from the sidelines. Although she'd smiled and been genuinely pleased whenever one of her cousins or one of her friends had announced she was pregnant, a tiny part of Ella had mourned the fact she'd never know the joy of being a mum. And now she was actually going to be a mum. Have a baby of her own. For a moment, sheer joy flooded through her. Despite almost impossible odds, she was going to have a baby. A Christmas miracle.

But then panic took over. What about her career? She'd already lost a lot of ground during her studies, thanks to the combination of her dyslexia and the pain of the endometriosis. Some days, the pain had been so debilitating that she hadn't been able to sit through lectures, and she'd had to borrow notes from friends instead of recording the lectures, and struggled as the words danced across the page. Even when her doctor had finally found some medication to help deal with the pain, things hadn't got much better, because then she'd had the ruptured cyst...

She'd worried that if her tutors knew the truth about her illness, they'd make her drop the course. They knew about her dyslexia and they'd already given her so much help, letting her record lectures so she could listen to them and absorb the knowledge that way. She couldn't possibly ask for yet more help. It'd be greedy and selfish. Ella almost gave in to her parents' suggestion to forget all about being a midwife and go home to Ireland. But then she'd had a work placement and she'd loved working on the ward so much. It had made her more determined to follow her dream of being a midwife, so she'd struggled on and scraped through her exams.

And she was always aware that she should've done better as a student, that her grades had let her down. It drove her to work harder on the ward, to prove to everyone round her that she was better than her exam results said she was. All the way through her medical career, she'd asked to use computer software to dictate notes rather than rely on her terrible handwriting, she'd used coloured lenses in her glasses so she could manage with bright paper or a screen, and she'd asked colleagues to proofread her notes—because she'd never, ever put a patient at risk by not double-checking that everything in the notes was absolutely correct. And, even though people weren't supposed to discriminate against you at work if you had a medical condition, Ella had always felt the need to work extra hard, just to prove that her dyslexia wouldn't make any difference to her ability to do her job.

But going on maternity leave in six months' time would have a huge impact on her career. She'd lose experience and study time. And what would happen when her maternity leave had ended? Juggling work and still managing to spend a decent amount of time with the baby, as a single parent, was going to be tricky. Arranging childcare to fit round her shifts would be tricky, too.

Though she wasn't the baby's only parent.

And that was something else that worried her.

There was only one man who could be the father, because she'd only ever slept with Oliver.

Once.

How, how, how had she managed to get pregnant? Then again, how many times had a young mum-to-be cried on her shoulder that it had been the first time she'd had sex and she'd been so sure you couldn't get pregnant if it was your first time?

But, that night, Ella had told Oliver it was safe not to use a condom. Her doctors had been so sure that she couldn't have children—that her Fallopian tubes were so badly damaged that she probably wouldn't be able to have children even with the help of IVF—that she really had believed it was safe not to use a condom.

And now here she was: single, and pregnant with Oliver's baby after a one-night stand. How on earth was she going to tell him about the baby?

She had absolutely no idea what Oliver would say or how he'd react to the news. Since the night of the ball, things between them had cooled considerably. She wasn't sure which of the two of them was the more embarrassed about what had happened. He'd really reacted badly once he'd realised that she'd been a virgin. Working together had been awkward, and both of them had made excuses to avoid work social events where the other might be there.

Things had cooled even more when it turned out that Oliver had got the job as Assistant Head of Obstetrics. Although he wasn't directly Ella's boss, he was very much her senior. The last thing she wanted was for him—or anyone else at Teddy's—to think that she'd slept with him in an attempt to boost her career. She'd never do anything like that.

At least Oliver wasn't dating anyone else, as far as she knew, so that was one less complication to worry about. But how did you tell someone that you were expecting his baby, when you weren't even in a relationship with him and you had no idea how he'd react?

She couldn't even begin to frame the right words.

She knew she wasn't going to get a happy-ever-after, where Oliver went down on one knee with a hand clutched to his chest, declared his undying love for her and asked her to marry him. Though she wasn't naive enough to expect that. And if he did ask her, she certainly wasn't going to marry a man who didn't love her, just for the baby's sake. That wouldn't be fair to any of them.

But Ella did want Oliver to be involved with the baby. She'd had a really happy childhood. She'd been an only child, but her parents had both come from big families and she'd had plenty of cousins around, so it had been almost as good as having siblings. She wanted that for her baby, too: that feeling of being loved and wanted, of being part of a family. And, even though she wasn't expecting Oliver to resurrect anything more than a distant kind of friendship with her, she hoped that he would at least be there for their child as the baby grew up. It would be a terrible shame for either of them to miss out on any of that.

But what if Oliver didn't want anything to do with the baby at all? What if he expected her to have a termination?

Then she'd have to rethink her situation at the Royal Cheltenham. Seriously. She already knew that she absolutely didn't want a termination. Though working with Oliver in any way, shape or form would be impossible if he expected her to take that option. She'd have to leave the hospital and find a job somewhere else.

Even though she loved her job here at Teddy's, Ella knew she would need some support with the baby. Even if Oliver didn't expect her to have a termination, if he didn't want to be involved with the baby, then she'd have no choice but to go home to Ireland. Although her parents would be shocked and a bit disappointed in her at first, she knew they loved her and wanted the best for her. And she knew how much they'd wanted to be grandparents, even though they'd assured her that of course they weren't bothered by her infertility. They'd be on her side and help her with the baby, and maybe she could work part-time as a midwife in Limerick. Have the best of both worlds.

She cupped her hands protectively around her abdomen. 'Right at this moment, I have no idea how this is going to work out, baby,' she said softly. 'But one thing I do know: I definitely want you. I never dreamed I'd be lucky enough to have you, and I'm so glad I am. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me—and I'm going to try my hardest to be the best mum to you I can.'

She splashed water on her face, wrapped the test kit in a plastic bag and stored it in her pocket, then returned to the ward.

'Are you all right, Ella?' Annabelle, her best friend and the head neonatal nurse on the ward, asked.

'I'm fine,' Ella fibbed. 'You haven't seen Oliver anywhere, have you?'

'I think he's in a meeting. Is it urgent, or can one of the other doctors fill in for him?'

It wasn't urgent exactly—her pregnancy wouldn't show for a few weeks yet—but absolutely nobody else could fill in for him on this. Not that she could tell Annabelle without telling her the

rest of it. And, given the reasons why Annabelle's marriage to Max had collapsed, Ella wanted to choose her words carefully so she didn't rip open her best friend's old scars. Particularly as Max was now working at Teddy's, easing in to a role as Sienna's maternity cover. Annabelle had opened her heart to Ella about the situation, the previous day, and Ella just couldn't say anything that might hurt her best friend.

'It'll wait,' Ella said, trying to keep her voice light.

And it was probably for the best that Oliver wasn't available right now. It would give her some space and time to think about how she was going to tell him the news.

The afternoon was also filled with antenatal appointments; one mum in particular was really worried.

'So this baby's in the same position that her brother was in?' Sara Reynolds asked.

'Back to back—yes,' Ella confirmed.

'So that means another long labour followed by an emergency section?' Sara grimaced. 'I know I agreed to a trial of labour, but I'm so scared my scar might come open halfway through and I'll have to be rushed into the operating theatre. And the idea of being in labour for two days again and then being stuck in bed for a week, feeling as bad as I did last time, when Jack's so lively...' She shook her head. 'I can't do it. I can't, Ella.'

'It's not going to be like that,' Ella reassured her. 'We'll keep a really close eye on you, and we're not going to let you struggle. Though you're right about a back-to-back labour taking longer, and this little one's been very happily settled in that position for the last three appointments.'

'You don't think she'll move round?'

'At this stage, no. I'll go and have a word with your consultant,' Ella said, 'but I'm pretty sure he'll agree with me in the circumstances that we should be able to offer you an elective section.'

'But if I have a section, doesn't that mean I'll be stuck in bed for a week and I won't be able to drive for a month?' Sara looked worried. 'And I need the car to get Jack to nursery. It's four miles away and there isn't a bus.'

'Last time,' Ella said gently, 'you'd had a two-day labour before the section. It's not surprising that it took it out of you. This time round, you won't have to go through that first, so it'll be easier and you'll be a lot more mobile. Nowadays we say you can drive when you feel ready, though if you can give it three weeks to let yourself heal that would be good. Maybe one of your family or friends nearby can help with the nursery run?'

Sara bit her lip. 'My cousin said she'd come and help.'

'Well, that's great.' Ella smiled at her and squeezed her hand. 'Give me five minutes and I'll have a chat with your consultant.'

Who would have to be Oliver, she saw with dismay as she looked at Sara's notes on the computer screen.

Provided she didn't let herself think about the situation she hadn't had a chance to discuss with him, she should be able to deal with this. Her patient had to come first.

Thankfully, Oliver was out of his meeting. Ella could see him sitting at his computer, typing away and looking slightly grim. Working on notes following his meeting, maybe? Hopefully he wouldn't mind the interruption. She rapped on his open door. 'You look busy, but please can I interrupt you for three minutes on behalf of one of my mums, given that you're her consultant and you need to be the one to sign off on the decisions?'

'Sure.'

He didn't smile at her, but that was OK. This was work. She ran through the brief. 'The mum is Sara Reynolds, thirty-six weeks, second baby. Last time round, the baby was back-to-back and she had a two-day labour followed by an emergency section. This baby's been in the same position for the last three appointments, and I don't think she's going to move now. Sara originally agreed to a trial of labour, but she's really worried that she'll end up with another long labour, and she'll have

to have another emergency section that'll leave her unable to function for weeks. Given the baby's position and that Sara's got a really lively toddler to cope with as well, I really think she'd be better off having a planned section.'

'Let me look at her notes so I can bring myself up to speed with exactly what happened last time,' Oliver said.

'OK.' And please don't let him be long, Ella thought. She was starting to pick up the smell from his coffee cup and it was making her stomach roil.

But clearly his computer system was on a go-slow when it came to retrieving the patient's notes, and it got to the point where she couldn't bear the smell of coffee any more.

'Excuse me a moment,' she said, and fled to the toilet. Thankfully it was queasiness again rather than actually being sick, and she splashed water onto her face until she felt able to cope again.

When she got back to Oliver's office, he'd clearly had time to review Sara's notes.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes. I just felt a bit...' No, now really wasn't the time for her to tell him that it was morning sickness. She stopped. 'I'm fine.'

'If you're going down with that sickness bug, I want you off the ward right now before you pass it on to anyone else,' he said. 'Go home, Ella.'

'It's not that.' She didn't want to tell him the real reason right now. It wasn't the time or the place, and she still didn't have the right words to explain the situation to him. 'So do you have an answer for Sara?'

'Yes. I agree with you, so I've marked on her notes that I'm happy for her to have an elective section. I'll get it booked in with Theatre. Do you want me to come and have a word with her?'

'No, it's fine.' Especially as that coffee was making her feel queasy again and she didn't want to have to dash off to the toilets again and risk him working out what was really going on. 'Thanks. I'd better get back to my patient. Catch you later.'



Ella was acting really oddly, Oliver thought. Rushing out of his office like that. Yet she'd been adamant that she wasn't going down with the sickness bug that was sweeping through the hospital.

So what was the problem?

Things had been awkward between them ever since the night of the masked ball. The night when he'd taken her virginity. He still felt guilty about it; and as a result he'd probably been even more cool with her than she was being with him.

He really ought to have a chat with her and try to get things back on an even keel between them. Especially as he was the Assistant Head of Obstetrics now. There was absolutely no way they could get involved with each other; although he wasn't directly her boss, he was her senior. Though it would be nice to salvage some kind of working relationship, so they were at least on semi-friendly terms in the department. He liked Ella. He missed the easiness between them.

As for anything more... Well, he'd told her the truth. He wasn't a good bet when it came to relationships. Even though Ella was the one woman he thought might actually tempt him to try, it just couldn't happen. It would all go wrong and wreck their working relationship for good.

He knew she'd be writing up her notes after her appointments, so he quickly typed out a message on the hospital's internal email system.

We need to have a chat. Come and see me when you're done today.

Before he hit 'send', he added 'please', so she'd know he wasn't being cold and snooty with her. And hopefully they could sort things out.



We need to have a chat. Come and see me when you're done today, please.

Oh, help. That sounded very formal and very ominous, Ella thought as she read the email at the end of her shift. Why did Oliver want to see her?

She hadn't put a foot wrong in her job ever since she'd moved from London to Teddy's eighteen months ago. But, now Oliver was Assistant Head of Obstetrics, he was bound to have read everyone's file, to help him get a handle on the team and see where anyone might need more training. If he'd read her file, then he'd know that she'd only just scraped through her exams at university. Was this why he wanted to see her? Did this mean he was going to expect her to prove herself all over again?

Great. Just the thing to start off a Saturday evening. Not.

Dreading what he was going to say, she went to Oliver's office. 'You wanted to see me?'

He looked up from his desk. 'Yes. Close the door, please.'

Now that was really worrying. Was he about to tell her that he was reorganising the team and there wasn't a space for her? She couldn't think why else he would reverse his usual open-door policy.

Adrenalin slid down her spine, and she did as he'd asked.

'We need to talk,' he said, gesturing to the chair opposite his.

'Right.' She sat down.

'Coffee?'

Even the thought of it made her gag. She tried really hard to stop the reflex, using the trick her dentist had taught her last time she'd had to have an X-ray by making a fist of her left hand, squeezing her thumb with her fingers. Except it didn't help and she still found herself gagging.

'Are you all right, Ella?' Oliver asked.

'Mmm,' she fibbed. 'Maybe some water would help.'

He narrowed his eyes at her. 'What aren't you telling me?'

Oh, help. She wasn't ready for this conversation. At all. And it made it worse that every time she looked at him, she remembered what it felt like to be in his arms. What it felt like to kiss him. What it felt like when his bare skin was sliding against hers...

And this wasn't the time and the place for remembering that, either. 'Why did you want to see me?' she asked instead of answering his question. 'Am I losing my job?'

'Losing your job?' Oliver looked surprised. 'Of course not. Why would you think that?'

'Your note was pretty ominous.'

He frowned. 'It was meant to be polite.'

'And you just asked me to close the door...'

'I'm not sacking you, Ella, and this isn't a disciplinary meeting, if that's what you're thinking.' He raked a hand through his hair. 'Things are a bit strained between us and I wanted to clear the air, that's all. Look, let me grab you some water or some coffee, and we can—' He stopped abruptly. 'Ella, you've gone green. Are you quite sure you're not going down with the sickness bug?'

'I'm sure.'

'Then what's wrong?'

She couldn't see her way out of this. She was going to have to tell him at some point, so it might as well be now. And she'd had all afternoon to think about how to tell him and still hadn't come up with the right words. Maybe short and to the point would be the best option. 'I'm pregnant,' she said miserably.



Pregnant?

Oliver's head spun and he actually had to shake his head physically to clear it.

Pregnant.

He'd been here before. With Justine. Except the baby hadn't been his, because Justine had lied to him all along. He knew Ella was nothing like Justine; but the past still haunted him.

The last time those words had been said to him, he'd been just as shocked. The baby hadn't been planned and he'd still been studying for his specialist exams. He hadn't been ready for the extra responsibility of parenthood, but of course he'd done the right thing and stood by Justine. It was his duty.

And then, when Justine had finally told him the truth, he'd been let off the hook. Except by then he'd started to think of himself as a dad. Having that taken away from him had hurt even more than Justine's betrayal. He'd been shocked by how isolated and lost he'd felt—and he'd sworn that never again would he let himself get emotionally involved or in a position where someone could hurt him like that.

Now here he was again, hearing a woman tell him that she was expecting his baby. Even though Ella came from a completely different background, and he'd worked with her for long enough to trust her on a lot of levels—the situation brought back all the hurt and mistrust.

'How pregnant?' he asked carefully.

'My last period was the middle of October. I'm nearly three weeks late.'

'Seven weeks, then,' he said, calculating rapidly. They'd had unprotected sex on the night of the Hallowe'en ball. That would've been two weeks after the start of her last period, from what she'd just said. Which meant they'd had sex right in the middle of her cycle: the most fertile time.

And she'd been a virgin—something that made him feel guilty and protective of her at the same time. And which put all kind of inappropriate memories in his head: the way her voice had gone all husky with arousal, the way her pupils had gone wide and dark with desire, the way it had felt when he'd finally eased into her...

Oh, for pity's sake. He couldn't think of that now. She'd just told him she was pregnant.

Of course it was his baby. There was no question that it was anyone else's baby. Everyone knew that Ella was completely devoted to her job—come to think of it, she hadn't dated anyone since he'd known her.

Except for that one snatched evening with him. And he'd been the only man who'd ever shared her bed like that—with the ultimate closeness. Which made it special, because Ella wasn't the sort to sleep around.

She looked anxious. 'So you believe me?'

'That you're pregnant? Or that it's mine? Obviously the dates tally. And, given the situation, it's pretty obvious that the baby's mine.' He looked at her. 'I assume you've done a test, to be this sure about it?'

She nodded. 'Today.'

'And you didn't suspect anything before today?'

She frowned. 'No.'

'Even though your period was late?'

'I put that down to stress,' she said. 'You know it's been crazy round here, with so many people off sick, plus Sienna's going off on maternity leave really soon and it'll take Max a while to settle in properly. We're all rushed off our feet.'

'So what made you decide to do a test today?' Then he remembered how she'd run out of his office, admitting afterwards that she'd felt a bit sick. He'd assumed she was going down with the bug. But it hadn't been that at all. 'You started getting morning sickness,' he said, answering his own question.

She nodded. 'I can't bear the smell of strong aftershave and coffee. That's what made me...' She swallowed hard, obviously feeling queasy at just the thought of the scents.

He grabbed one of the bottles of water he kept in his desk drawer and pushed it across the desk at her. 'Here.'

'Thank you.' She unscrewed the cap and took a sip of water. 'Oliver, I didn't mean this to happen. I wasn't trying to trap you, or try to sleep my way up the ladder or anything like that. It wasn't planned.'

'Too right it wasn't planned,' he said grimly. He wasn't angry with her, but he was furious with himself. Why hadn't he taken proper responsibility when it came to precautions? More to the point, why had he made love with her in the first place, when he'd managed to keep his hands to himself and his libido under control for the last eighteen months? Why had he given into temptation that night, let the single glass of champagne he'd drunk go completely to his head and wipe out his inhibitions enough to let him kiss her and take her to bed?

Though he really wasn't prepared to answer those questions right now.

Instead, to cover up his guilt and confusion, he snapped at her. 'So what was it? The Pill didn't work?'

She flinched. 'I'm not on the Pill.'

What? He could hardly believe what he was hearing. 'You led me to believe you were.' So, in a way, she'd been as devious as Justine. Clearly his judgement was incredibly poor when it came to relationships.

'I didn't say I was on the Pill.'

'You hinted at it.' He remembered it very clearly. 'You said I didn't need a condom. Why would you say that unless you were taking the Pill?'

'Well, that lets you very nicely off the hook, doesn't it? Because it's all my fault. That's fine. I accept the entire blame for the situation.' She screwed the cap back on the water bottle. 'Don't worry, Mr Darrington, I'm not expecting anything from you. I just thought you had the right to know about the baby.' She stood up. 'I'm officially off duty right now, so I'm going home.'

'Wait. Ella.' He blew out a breath. 'You've just told me you're expecting my baby. At least give me time to process the news. And what do you mean, you're not expecting anything from me? As the baby's father, of course I'll support you financially.' Just as he'd supported Justine when he'd thought that she was pregnant with his baby. A Darrington always did the right thing.

'I don't want your money.'

'Tough. Because I have no intention of letting you go through this unsupported and on your own.' He stared at her. One thing he was very sure about: this time he wasn't going to have fatherhood snatched away from him. This time he was exercising his rights, and he was going to have choices. 'It's my baby, too, Ella. So that means I get a say. In everything.'

'I never had you pegged as an overbearing bully,' she said, 'but you're behaving like one right now. I'm telling you about the baby purely out of courtesy, and I know you're not interested in being with me so I don't expect anything from you. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've already told you I'm off duty and I want to go home. Goodnight.'

This time, she walked out.

By the time Oliver had gathered his thoughts enough to think of going after her, Ella was nowhere to be seen.

Great.

If he ran after her now, everybody would notice. The last thing either of them needed right now was to have the hospital speculating about their relationship—or, worse still, actually guessing that Ella was pregnant with his baby.

He needed time to think about this. To get used to the idea. To work out exactly what he was going to do.

So much for thinking that he and Ella could smooth over what had happened that night and try to repair their working relationship. Her bombshell had just changed everything. And right at that moment he didn't have a clue what to do next, or even what to think. She hadn't even told him why she hadn't been on the Pill, and he needed to get to the bottom of that. His head was spinning.

He'd finish all the admin here and then go for a run to clear his head. And then, maybe, he'd be able to work out the best way forward. For all three of them.



The run cleared his head a bit. But then the reality slammed home. He was going to be a father.

Oliver took a deep breath. He'd been here before, but this time he had no doubts at all. The baby was his, and so was the responsibility. OK, so she'd told him he didn't need to use protection, and that had turned out not to be true—but it took two to make a baby. Plus Ella's family lived hundreds of miles away in Ireland; although her best friend lived in Cheltenham, it basically meant that Ella was on her own. She and the baby needed him to step up to the plate and be responsible.

He could start by making sure that she was taking folic acid and eating properly. Which was hard in the early stages, when you had morning sickness and couldn't face the smell or taste of certain foods. He now knew the smell of coffee was a trigger for her, so he needed to find something that was bland, yet nutritious and tempting at the same time. Decaffeinated tea might be easier for her than coffee; he knew she usually drank tea at work. And maybe some fresh strawberries, pasteurised yoghurt and granola.

He dropped in to the supermarket on his way home, trying to ignore the piped Christmassy music and the stacks of Christmas chocolates and goodies displayed throughout the shop. Right now it didn't feel much like Christmas. It felt as if the world had been shaken upside down and he wasn't quite sure what day it was. Though he rather thought he might need some kind of Christmas miracle right now.

He concentrated on picking out things he thought might tempt Ella to eat, and added a box of vitamins specially formulated for pregnant women. Then he came to the large stand of flowers by the tills. Did Ella even like flowers? He didn't have a clue. He knew some women hated cut flowers, preferring to let them bloom in a garden or on an indoor plant. And there was the scent issue. Something as strong as lilies might set off her morning sickness.

But it would be a gesture. A start. A way of showing her that he wanted to be on the same side. Maybe something not over-the-top and showy, like the large bouquets sprinkled with artificial snow and glitter. Something a little smaller and bright and cheerful with no scent, like the bunch of sunny yellow gerbera. Although he didn't have a vase at home, he could stick them in a large glass of water overnight so they'd still look nice in the morning. Hopefully Ella would like them.

Then maybe tomorrow they could talk sensibly about their options. Hopefully Ella would tell him what she really wanted. She'd said that she was only telling him about the baby out of courtesy, but did she really mean that? Did she want him to be part of the baby's life—part of her life? Or did she really mean to do what their colleague Sienna seemed to be doing, and go it alone?

And what did he want?

Since Justine's betrayal, Oliver had major trust issues when it came to relationships. He didn't date seriously. He hadn't even wanted a proper relationship, thinking that the risks of getting hurt again were too high. But the fact that Ella was expecting his baby changed that. He knew he definitely wanted to be a part of his child's life.

And Ella? He'd fought against his attraction towards her for months, keeping it strictly professional between them at work. Then, the night of the charity ball, he'd danced with her; it had felt so right to hold her in his arms. To kiss her, when he'd driven her home. To make love with her, losing himself inside her.

If he was honest with himself, he wanted to do it again. And more. He wanted to wake up with her curled in his arms. Being with Ella had made him feel that the world was full of sunshine. That snatched evening was the first time he'd felt really connected with anyone for years. He could actually see them as a family: Ella nursing the baby at the kitchen table, chatting to him about his day when he got home from work. Going to the park, with himself pushing the pram and Ella by

his side—maybe with a little dog, too. Reading a bedtime story to the baby together and doing all the voices between them.

They could give their baby the kind of childhood he hadn't had. One filled with warmth and love.

But then reality slammed in. Did she feel the same way about him? Did she want to make a family with him, or did she just want financial support, the way Justine had? OK, so she didn't know who his parents were, and she'd said earlier that she didn't want his money—but was it true?

Had it meant anything to her, giving him her virginity? Or had it all just been a nuisance to her, an embarrassment, something she wanted to get rid of and he'd happened to be in a convenient place to do her a favour? And why had she been so adamant that they didn't need contraception—especially as it now turned out that she hadn't been on the Pill?

He didn't have a clue. In normal circumstances, that would be a difficult conversation to have. With pregnancy hormones clouding the issue, it was going to be even harder.

Tomorrow.

He'd sleep on it and hope that the right words would lodge themselves in his head by tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

ON SUNDAY MORNING, Oliver drove over to the pretty little square where Ella's flat was and rang her doorbell.

She opened the door wearing pyjamas, sleepy-eyed and with her hair all mussed. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you,' he said.

'It's almost half-past nine, so it's my bad,' she said wryly. 'What do you want?'

He held up the recyclable shopping bag. 'I brought breakfast. I thought maybe we could talk.'

'Breakfast?'

'And these.' He handed her the gerbera. 'I hope you like them.'

Unexpectedly, her beautiful green eyes filled with tears. 'Oliver, they're gorgeous. I love yellow flowers. Thank you. Though you really didn't have to do that.'

'I wanted to,' he admitted. And right now, seeing her all warm and sleepy, he really wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close and tell her that he'd protect her from the world.

Except he wasn't sure how she'd react, and he knew he needed to take this slowly and carefully until he had a better idea of what was going on in her head. He wasn't going to end up in the same place he'd been after Justine, where he'd been in love with her but she hadn't loved him back.

'Come in. I'll put the kettle on.' She ushered him through to her living room. 'I'll go and have a quick shower and get dressed, and then I'll put those lovely flowers in water.'

'You don't have to change on my behalf.'

She gave him a speaking glance. 'I can't be sitting here at my kitchen table in pyjamas, with you all dressed up like a magazine model.'

'Apart from the fact that I'm not all dressed up, I don't mind if you stay in your pyjamas.'

'Well, I do.'

He really didn't want to sit around doing nothing. It wasn't his style. He'd always preferred keeping busy. 'Shall I make breakfast, then, while you're showering?'

He could see that she was torn between insisting that it was her flat so it was her job to make breakfast, and letting him do something. 'All right,' she said finally. 'I normally eat in the kitchen, if that's all right with you.'

'OK. I'll see you when you're ready.'



By the time Ella had showered and changed into jeans and a cute Christmassy sweater with a reindeer in a bow tie on the front, Oliver had laid two places at the tiny bistro table in her kitchen and had arranged everything on the table: freshly squeezed orange juice, granola, yoghurt and a bowl of hulled and washed strawberries. It looked amazing. And she couldn't remember the last time anyone apart from her parents had made this kind of fuss over her. Right now she felt cherished—special—and it was a good feeling.

'No coffee,' he said.

'Thanks. I really can't bear the smell of it.'

'And that's why I held off on the croissants. Just in case they affected you, too.' He gestured to the teapot. 'The tea's decaf—I thought it might be easier for you to manage.'

'That's so sweet.' He'd made all this effort just for her, and her heart melted. 'This all looks so nice. Thank you.'

'I had to guess because I didn't really know what kind of thing you like for breakfast.'

She blushed. 'You didn't stay for breakfast when... Well, you know.'

'Uh-huh.'

Right at that moment, he looked just as embarrassed and awkward as she felt. She'd been stupid to bring up the issue.

'I just wanted to do something nice for you,' he said.

'And I appreciate it,' she said meaning it.

He poured her a mug of tea. 'No sugar, right?'

She loved the fact that he'd actually noticed how she took her tea. 'Right.'

'So how are you feeling?' he asked.

'Mostly fine. Just as long as I avoid strong smells.' She smiled. 'And that should get better in about six weeks, or so I always tell my mums.'

'It's usually better by the second trimester,' he agreed.

'I thought Sienna was teasing me when she told me that tin cans actually smell when you're pregnant,' Ella said, 'but she's right. They do.' She shuddered, and took a sip of the orange juice. 'This is lovely. Thank you so much. I feel totally spoiled.'



'It's the least I could do.' Again, Oliver could imagine having breakfast with Ella on Sunday mornings. A lazy breakfast, with toast and tea and the Sunday papers, and then taking the baby out together for a late-morning walk in the park... It shocked him to discover how much he actually wanted that.

A real relationship.

With Ella and their baby.

Thankfully she hadn't noticed him mooning about, because she asked, 'So is everything OK with you?'

'Yes.'

'And you're settling in well to your new job?'

'Just about,' he said, smiling back at her. Maybe this was going to work out. They could at least make polite conversation. And they'd been friends before the masked ball. They respected each other as colleagues. He really believed they could salvage something from this now.

He kept the conversation going until they'd finished breakfast and he started clearing the table; then he noticed that there was still something left in the bag he'd brought with him. 'Oh, I meant to give you this earlier.' He took the box of vitamins from the bag and handed them to her.

She frowned. 'What's this?'

'Folic acid—obviously now you know about the baby, you need to start taking it.'

'Uh-huh.' Her face shuttered. 'Did it occur to you that I might already have bought a pregnancy vitamin supplement with folic acid?'

'I—' He stared at her. No. He hadn't given it a second thought.

'Oliver, I'm a midwife. It'd be a bit stupid of me to ignore my years of training about the best way for pregnant women to look after themselves and their babies, wouldn't it?'

She sounded really put out, though he couldn't for the life of him understand why. All he'd done was buy her some vitamins. 'I was just trying to help. To look after you.'

'To take over, more like,' she said.

'But—'

'Do you think I'm suffering from "pregnancy brain" and I'm completely flaky?' she asked. She shook her head, narrowing her eyes at him. 'And, for your information, "pregnancy brain" is a total myth. I came across a piece on the news the other day that said actually women's brains are sharper when they're pregnant.'

What? Where was all this coming from? He didn't understand. 'Ella, I didn't accuse you of anything of the sort.'

‘No, but you bought me folic acid without even thinking that I might already have some. There’s a huge difference between asking me if you can pick something up for me, and just presenting me with it as if I’m too stupid to have thought of it for myself.’

‘You’re overreacting.’

‘Am I?’ She folded her arms. ‘If this is how it’s going to be for the next seven and a half months, with you looking over my shoulder all the time and making decisions for me without even bothering to discuss things with me first...’ Again, she shook her head. ‘That’s really overbearing and that’s not what I want, Oliver. Actually, right now I think I’d like you to leave and give me some space.’

He stared at her in disbelief. ‘All I want to do is to protect you and the baby, and provide for you. How’s that being overbearing?’



Could he really not see it? Ella wondered. ‘It’s overbearing because you’re not discussing anything with me. You’ve made the decision already and you’re expecting me to just shut up and go along with it.’ She’d been there before: when everyone thought that little Ella wasn’t bright enough to train as a midwife. She hated the way Oliver seemed to be falling into those same attitudes and thinking he knew what was best for her. She’d had years of feeling undermined and useless, and she wasn’t going to let it happen again. ‘And if you dare say that’s just pregnancy hormones making me grumpy, I’ll...I’ll...’ She was too angry to think of what she’d do next. So much for thinking he wanted to cherish her. What an idiot she was, letting herself fall a little more in love with a control freak who wanted to boss her around.

‘Ella, this is—’

‘I need some space. Thank you for the flowers and breakfast, because that was very nice of you, but I’d really like you to leave now. Please.’

‘What about the washing up?’

‘I think I might just about be capable of sorting that out for myself.’ She stood up and gestured to the doorway. ‘Would you give me some space, please?’



Maybe making a tactical retreat would be the best thing to do right now, Oliver thought. ‘All right.’

He wasn’t sure whether her reaction had made him more hurt or angry. He’d tried to do the right thing, but Ella was being totally unreasonable. He’d never called her intelligence into question. Why on earth would she think he had?

Despite her protests, he was pretty sure that pregnancy hormones were affecting her mood.

He’d try to talk to her again later and hope that she’d be in a better frame of mind. More receptive.

Going to the gym and pounding the treadmill didn’t help. Neither did going to his office and spending a couple of hours catching up on paperwork.

Was he really being overbearing and making decisions without asking her? Oliver wondered.

A simple box of vitamins really shouldn’t cause this much trouble.

Justine had been more than happy for him to make a fuss of her and buy things for her while she was pregnant. Then again, she’d had her reasons. But Ella was seriously independent. Brave enough to travel to London at the age of eighteen to study midwifery, so far from her family home in Ireland that she wouldn’t be able to just pop home for the weekend like most of the other students could. And she’d be brave enough to bring up this baby on her own.

Except she didn’t have to.

He wanted to be there. For her and for the baby.

He didn't want to tell her about Justine—not just yet—but he could try to build a bridge. Try to see things from Ella's point of view.

It didn't take him long to drive back to her flat.

This time, when she answered the doorbell, she didn't smile.

'Hear me out?' he asked. 'Please?'

She said nothing, but at least she didn't slam the door in his face. 'I was going to get you flowers as an apology, but I already bought you flowers this morning and I don't want you to think I'm going over the top—especially as you already think I'm being overbearing. I had no idea what to get you. I don't know what you like, so I just...' Oliver hated feeling so clueless and awkward. Normally he was in charge and he knew everything would go smoothly. This was way out of his comfort zone.

'It doesn't matter. I don't need you to buy me things.'

Another difference between Ella and the women he usually dated: they expected presents. Expensive presents.

'The most important thing is that I'm sorry for being bossy. I don't mean to be and I'll try not to be. But,' he said, 'old habits die hard, and I can't promise that I won't mess up in the future.'

Her face softened, then, as if she understood the jumble of thoughts filling his head, and she stepped back from the doorway. 'Come in and I'll make some tea—and, for the record, I'm perfectly capable of filling a kettle with water and boiling it.'

'I know,' he said. He'd got the message that Ella liked her independence. 'But is there anything I can do to help?'

'Just sit down and let me do it myself.'

He waited on the sofa in the living room, feeling more and more antsy as the seconds passed.

Finally, she came in with two mugs of tea.

'Thank you,' he said, accepting one of the mugs.

She inclined her head in acknowledgement and sat down at her desk rather than next to him on the sofa. Making a point, he supposed.

'It must be difficult for you, being in this situation,' she said.

That was an understatement. She didn't know anything about the memories it was bringing back, and right at the moment it wasn't something he wanted to share. 'It's not exactly a picnic for you, either,' he said, trying to see it from her point of view. 'All I need to do is to get my head round this properly.' All. He was struggling enough with that. 'But it's worse for you because you get all the morning sickness and what have you as well.'

'Thanks for reminding me,' she said dryly.

'Ella, I want to be there for you and the baby.'

'I understand that. But it doesn't give you the right to push me around.'

He hadn't been trying to push her around, but he didn't want to argue. Now was probably not the right time to ask difficult questions about the contraception issue, either. He wanted to get their relationship on a less rocky footing, first. Instead, he asked carefully, 'So have you thought about what kind of care you want, and whether you want to book in at Teddy's or if you'd rather go somewhere else?'

'I know all the staff at Teddy's and I know I'll get the best care there, so it makes sense to book in to our department,' she said. 'Though it does mean everyone's going to know. And at a really early stage.'

'Is that a problem?'

She looked thoughtful. 'I guess not—I mean, everyone's been great about Sienna. After the initial gossip, wondering who the baby's father is.'

'Would you prefer people not to know I'm the baby's father?'

'I don't want people thinking I slept with you to get an advantage at work.'

He smiled. 'Ella, nobody would ever think that of you. You work hard enough for two people as it is.' He paused. 'What about a scan?'

'I already know I'm about seven weeks.'

'Which is about the right time for a dating scan—not that I disbelieve you on the dates, just...'

She nodded. 'Though it'll mean people will know now, not later on.'

'Yes, and they'll cut you a bit of slack—this is the stage where you're likely to feel really tired and need a break.'

'I'll still be part of the team, and being pregnant doesn't alter that.'

Why was she being so difficult about this? 'I'm not saying that you're not part of the team—just that maybe you could cut back a bit on your shifts for a while.'

Her face darkened. 'No.'

'Ella—'

'I said before, please don't push me around. You're not my keeper, Oliver.'

'I know. I'm just trying to do what's best for you.'

'Because I'm not bright enough to know what's best for me?'

'No, of course not.' He didn't get why she was being so prickly. 'Ella, is there something you're not telling me?'

'How do you mean?'

'You and me—we've always got on well. Until—well.' He didn't want to embarrass her by putting it into words.

But she clearly wanted to face it head-on. 'Until we slept together.'

'I feel guilty about that. You're not the sort who does one-night stands—and I took your virginity.'

'Which isn't an issue.'

'It is for me.'

She looked confused. 'Why?'

'Because it makes me feel dishonourable.'

She scoffed. 'Oh, get over yourself, Oliver. What are you, the Lord of the Manor?'

Not far off it. But he needed to get back on reasonable terms with her before he dropped that particular bombshell. 'I'm sorry. I did warn you I'd mess up on the control freakery stuff.'

'I guess. And maybe I need to cut you some slack, too—but how would you feel if I suggested you cut back on your shifts, just because you'll have a baby in seven months' time?'

He nodded. 'I get it.'

She rubbed her stomach reflectively. 'So is there a new girlfriend who might not be very happy to hear the news?'

'No, there isn't.' And the question stung. 'Do you really think I'm that shallow?'

'No, but you never seem to date anyone for long.'

'Strictly speaking, I didn't actually date you,' he pointed out. 'We both got carried away, that night.'

'I guess.' She paused. 'So why do you avoid proper relationships?'

Something else he didn't want to discuss. 'Let's just say I've been a bit burned in the past.'

'And you're still brooding over it enough not to give someone else a chance? She must've hurt you a lot.'

'Yes. She did,' he admitted.

'I'm sorry that you got hurt. But I'm nothing like the usual women you date.'

'Usual?'

She grimaced. 'I haven't been gossiping about you. But the hospital grapevine says you pick women who look like models, women from a much posher background than mine.'

He stared at her. 'You think I'm a snob?'

‘No. You treat all our mums the same, whether they’re ordinary women or royalty or celebs,’ she said. ‘I guess what I’m saying is I’m me, so don’t go thinking I’ll be like her.’

‘You’re not like her.’ He trusted Ella, for a start. Professionally. But letting her into his heart would take a lot longer. Justine had left him with a lot of baggage.

Though he really didn’t want to talk to Ella about Justine right now. Especially given their circumstances. How did you tell someone who was expecting your baby that you’d been here before—but the baby hadn’t been yours? She’d start reading all kinds of things into that and what he might be thinking now, and he was having a hard time explaining it to himself; he certainly couldn’t explain his feelings to her. Wanting to change the subject, he asked, ‘What about you?’

Her eyes widened. ‘You seriously think I’d date someone else when I’m pregnant with your baby?’

He winced. ‘That sounds bad. I mean... You only just found out about the baby. You might’ve met someone between Hallowe’en and now.’

‘No. There isn’t anyone.’

‘OK.’

And actually the hospital grapevine said she didn’t date. Ella was dedicated to her work. Oliver assumed that someone had hurt her badly in the past and she didn’t trust love any more, the same way that he didn’t trust love. But he could hardly grill her about it. That would be intrusive; besides, right now their relationship was so fragile he didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing and making it worse. ‘Have you told your parents?’ he asked.

‘Not yet. I think I’d prefer to do that face to face—video-calling isn’t good enough for news like this,’ she said. ‘I’m going home for two days at Christmas. I’ll tell them then.’

‘How do you think they’ll take it?’



With sheer disbelief, Ella thought. Her parents knew the situation with her endometriosis and the ruptured cyst. They’d resigned themselves to never having grandchildren, though she’d seen the wistfulness in her mum’s eyes every time one of her sisters became a grandmother again. Not that she wanted to discuss any of that with Oliver. Not right now. Because if he knew about her medical issues from the past, he’d try even harder to wrap her in cotton wool and it would drive her crazy.

‘They’ll be supportive,’ she said. She knew that without having to ask. They might be shocked, but they’d definitely be supportive. ‘How about yours?’

‘It’s complicated,’ he said.

Another stonewall. Oliver had been hurt by someone in the past and his family situation was complicated. Did that mean maybe his ex had dumped him for his brother, or something? Did he even have a brother or a sister? But, even if she asked him straight out, she knew he’d evade the subject. ‘You don’t give anything away, do you?’

‘I...’ He blew out a breath. ‘I’m making a mess of this.’

‘Yes, you are,’ she said. ‘It’s always better to be honest.’ Which was pretty hypocritical of her, considering what she was keeping from him.

He raked a hand through his hair. ‘Ella, right now all that matters to me is you and the baby.’

Why couldn’t she let herself believe him?

When she didn’t say anything, he sighed. ‘I’d really like to be there at the scan. But it’s your call.’

That was quite a capitulation—and one that clearly hadn’t come easily to him. He was used to being in charge at work, so of course he was going to be bossy outside work as well. And maybe she had overreacted a bit. Maybe he really had meant to be helpful and trying to look after her, rather than making her feel stupid. But she didn’t want to whine about her dyslexia. Plenty of people had more to deal with than she did.

Maybe she should capitulate a bit, too. 'I'll let you know when I've seen my doctor and got a date through,' she said.

'Thank you.' He finished his tea. 'I guess I should let you have the rest of your afternoon in peace. But call me if you need anything, OK? And I'm not trying to be bossy. I'm trying to be supportive.'

'Uh-huh.'

When she'd shown him out, she tidied up and washed up the mugs. She had absolutely no idea how this was going to work out. Oliver was clearly intending to do the right thing and stand by her—but she didn't want him to be with her out of duty. She wanted him there because he wanted to be there.

He hadn't said a word about his feelings. He hadn't asked her about hers, either. Which was just as well, because she was all mixed up. The attraction she'd felt towards him hadn't gone away, but she was pretty sure it was one-sided. She didn't want him to pity her for mooning about over him, so she'd been sharper towards him than normal. But then again, if it was that easy to push him away, he clearly didn't want to be with her in the first place.

'It'll work out,' she said quietly, cradling her abdomen protectively with one hand. 'If the worst comes to the worst, I'll go back home to my family in Ireland. But one thing I promise you, baby: even though you weren't planned, you'll always, always be loved. And if you're a girl I'm going to call you Joy, because that's what you are to me.'

CHAPTER THREE

ELLA WAS ON a late shift on the Monday morning, and called her GP's surgery as soon as they were open. To her surprise and delight, the GP was able to see her that morning before her shift.

'How are you feeling?' the GP asked when Ella told her she was pregnant.

'Fairly shocked,' Ella admitted. 'I didn't think this would ever happen, after what the doctors told me in London. But, now I've had a couple of days to get used to the idea, I'm thrilled.'

'Good.' The GP smiled. 'Congratulations. Are you having any symptoms?'

'A bit of morning sickness—it's not much fun if one of the dads-to-be on the ward is wearing a ton of aftershave, or if anyone at work's drinking coffee,' Ella admitted.

'I don't need to tell you that you should feel a lot better by the time you're twelve weeks.'

Ella smiled back. 'No. It's weird, because I'm usually the one giving that advice.'

'And you've already done a test?' the GP asked.

'Yes.'

'Then there's not much point in doing a second one,' the GP said. 'Given your medical history, though, I'd like to send you for an early scan. As you work at Teddy's, would you rather go there or would you prefer to book in for your antenatal care somewhere else?'

'Teddy's is fine,' Ella confirmed.

'Good. I'll put a call through to the ultrasound department this morning. Reception will contact you with the date and time.'

'That's great—thank you very much.'

By the time Ella got to Teddy's, the GP's surgery had already sent her a text with the date and time of her scan. Ella wasn't sure whether she was more relieved or shocked to discover that the scan was tomorrow morning, an hour before her shift was due to start.

Someone was bound to see her in the waiting room for the ultrasound, so the whole department would know about the baby very quickly. Which meant that Ella needed to find Annabelle and tell her the news herself. The last thing she wanted was for her best friend to hear about the baby from hospital gossip, especially as she knew what Annabelle had been through over the last few years.

Annabelle was in her office, clearly writing up some reports. Ella knocked on the door, opened it slightly and leaned through the gap. 'I can see you're really busy,' she said, 'but can I have a quick word?'

'Sure,' Annabelle said. 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes—there's just something I wanted to tell you.' Then Ella looked more closely at her friend. 'There's something different about you.'

'How do you mean, different?' Annabelle asked.

'You look happier than I've seen you in a long, long time.'

Annabelle smiled. 'That's because Max and I are back together. For good.'

'Really?' Thrilled for her friend, Ella leaned over the desk and hugged her. 'That's fabulous news.'

'All those years I thought I'd failed him because I couldn't give him children,' Annabelle blew out a breath. 'But he says I'm enough for him, Ella. He doesn't need a family to feel we're complete.'

'I'm so pleased.' Ella paused. 'So this means you're not going to try IVF again?'

'No. We might consider adopting in the future, but we need time to think about it. And time just to enjoy each other,' Annabelle said. 'So what's your news?'

Even though Annabelle seemed to be OK with the idea of not trying for a family, Ella knew that this was still a sensitive subject. 'There isn't an easy way to say this.'

'Oh, no. Please don't tell me you're leaving Teddy's.'

‘No.’ At least, she hoped she wasn’t going to have to leave. ‘Annabelle, I wanted you to know before anyone else on the ward does—because everyone’s going to know after tomorrow. And I really don’t want this to upset you.’

‘Now you’re really worrying me. Is it another cyst?’ Annabelle bit her lip. ‘Or—and I really hope it isn’t—something more sinister?’

Ella took a deep breath. ‘No. Nothing like that.’

‘Then will you please put me out of my misery?’

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Pregnant?’ Annabelle’s blue eyes widened. ‘That’s the last thing I expected you to tell me. But—how?’

Ella squirmed. ‘Basic biology?’

‘Apart from the fact that you’re not dating anyone—or, if you are, you haven’t told me about him—there’s your endometriosis and that ruptured cyst and all the damage to your Fallopian tubes,’ Annabelle pointed out. ‘I thought the doctors in London said there was no chance of you conceiving?’

‘They did. But I guess there was a billion to one chance after all.’ A Christmas miracle. One Ella had never dared to dream about.

‘I don’t know what to say. Are you...well, happy about it?’ Annabelle asked cautiously.

Ella nodded. Yet, at the same time, part of her was sad. This wasn’t how she’d dreamed of things being when she was a child; she’d imagined having a partner who loved her. That definitely wasn’t the situation with Oliver.

‘Congratulations. I’m so pleased for you.’ Annabelle hugged her. ‘How far are you?’

‘Seven weeks.’

‘Your mum will be over the moon at the idea of being a granny.’

Ella smiled. ‘I know. I’m going to tell her at Christmas when I go back to Ireland. Or maybe I’ll take a snap of the scan photograph on my phone and send it to her tomorrow.’

‘You’ve got a dating scan tomorrow? That’s fantastic. Do you want me to come with you?’ Annabelle asked.

‘That’s lovely of you to offer, but it’s fine.’

‘Of course. I guess the dad will want to be there.’

Dear Annabelle. She was clearly dying to know who it was, but she wasn’t going to push her friend to share all the details until Ella was ready.

‘The dad,’ Ella said, ‘is being just a little bit bossy at the moment and trying to wrap me up in cotton wool.’

Annabelle raised an eyebrow. ‘He doesn’t know you very well, then?’

‘It’s complicated.’ Ella took a deep breath. ‘I’m not actually dating him. And I’m not sure I’m ready for everyone to know who it is.’

‘Sienna, mark two?’ Annabelle asked wryly. ‘Well, that’s your right if you want to keep it to yourself. And you know I have your back.’

Ella smiled. ‘I know.’ Which was precisely why she was going to tell her best friend the truth. ‘Obviously this is totally confidential—it’s Oliver.’

‘Oliver?’ Annabelle asked in a scandalised whisper. ‘As in our Assistant Head of Obstetrics?’

Ella winced. Was it so unlikely? ‘Yes.’

‘But... When?’

‘The night of the charity ball. We danced together. A lot. He drove me home. And we...’ She shrugged. ‘Well...’

‘I had no idea you even liked him.’

‘I’ve liked him since the moment I met him,’ Ella admitted. ‘But I never said anything because I always thought he was way out of my league.’

Annabelle scoffed. ‘You’re lovely, and anyone who says otherwise has me to answer to.’

‘But you know what the hospital gossip’s like. They say he only dates people a couple of times—and they’re usually tall, willowy women who look like models or movie stars. As in the opposite of me.’

‘You’re beautiful,’ Annabelle said loyally.

‘Thank you, but we both know I’m not Oliver’s type. I’m too short and too round. And he... Well.’ Ella had absolutely no idea how Oliver felt about her. He was being overprotective, but was that because of the baby?

‘So what are you going to do?’ Annabelle asked.

‘I’m still working that out,’ Ella admitted.

‘Is he going to support you?’

‘He’s pretty much driven me crazy—presenting me with a box of folic acid, telling me to cut back on my shifts...’

‘Ah. The protective male instinct coming out. And you sent him away with a flea in his ear?’

Ella nodded. ‘You know how hard I worked to get through my exams. I’m not going to give all that up now.’

‘So what do you want him to do?’

‘Be part of the baby’s life,’ Ella said promptly. ‘And not boss me about. Except I want him to be there because he wants to be there, not just because he thinks he ought to be there.’

‘What does he say?’ Annabelle asked.

‘It’s—’ But Ella didn’t get the chance to finish the conversation, because one of their colleagues came in, needing Annabelle to come and see a patient.

‘We’ll talk later,’ Annabelle promised, on her way out of the door. Except Ella had a busy shift, starting with a normal delivery and then one that turned complicated, so she didn’t have time to catch up with Annabelle.

Everything was fine in her second delivery; there were no signs of complications and no signs of distress as she monitored the baby.

But, as the mum started to push, Ella realised that she was having difficulty delivering the baby’s face and head. The classic sign of the baby having a ‘turtle neck’ told her exactly what the problem was: shoulder dystocia, meaning that the baby’s shoulder was stuck behind the mum’s pubic bone. And in the meantime it meant that the umbilical cord was squashed, so the baby had less oxygenated blood reaching her.

‘Sophie, I need you to stop pushing,’ Ella said calmly. She turned to the trainee midwife who was working with her. ‘Jennie, please can you go and find Charlie? Tell him we have a baby with shoulder dystocia, then get hold of whichever anaesthetist and neonatal specialist is on call and ask them to come here.’

‘What’s happening?’ Sophie asked, looking anxious.

‘Usually, after the baby’s head is born, the head and body turns sideways so the baby’s shoulders pass comfortably through your pelvis. But sometimes that doesn’t happen because the baby’s shoulder gets stuck behind your pubic bone,’ Ella explained. ‘That’s what’s happened here. So we need a bit of extra help to get the baby out safely, and that’s why I’ve asked our obstetrician to come in. There will be a few people coming into the room and it’ll seem crowded and a bit scary, but please try not to worry. We’re just being super-cautious and making sure that someone’s there immediately if we need them, though with any luck we won’t need any of them.’

‘Does this happen very often?’ Sophie asked, clearly in distress.

‘Maybe one in a hundred and fifty to one in two hundred births,’ Ella said. ‘Try not to worry, Sophie. I’ve seen this happen a few times before, and we can still deliver the baby normally—but right now I’m going to have to ask you to stop pushing and change your position a bit so we can get the baby’s shoulder unstuck and deliver her safely.’

‘Anything you say,’ Sophie said. ‘I just want my baby here safely.’ A tear trickled down her face.

'I know.' Ella squeezed her hand. 'I promise you, it's all going to be fine. Now, I want you to lie on your back, then wriggle down so your bum's right at the very edge of the bed. Can you do that for me?'

'I think so.' Sophie panted a bit, clearly trying to hold back on pushing, and then moved down the bed according to Ella's directions.

Charlie came in with Jennie, followed by the anaesthetist and neonatal specialist. Ella introduced everyone to Sophie. 'Charlie, I want to try the McRoberts manoeuvre first,' she said quietly. It was the most effective method of getting a baby's shoulder unstuck, and would hopefully avoid Sophie having to have an emergency section.

'That's a sound decision,' Charlie said as he quickly assessed the situation. 'I've got another delivery, so if you're confident with this I'll leave you and the team. I'll be in the birthing suite next door—my patient's waters have just broken.

'I'm good, Charlie,' Ella said, then turned her attention back to Sophie as Charlie departed, leaving her to manage the birth.

'Sophie, I'd like you to bend your knees and pull your legs back towards your tummy,' Ella said. 'Jennie's here to help you. What that does is to change the angle of your spine and your pelvis and that gives the baby a little bit more room, and then hopefully we'll be able to get her shoulder out a lot more easily. You'll feel me pushing on your tummy—it shouldn't hurt, just feel like pressure, so tell me straight away if it starts to hurt, OK?'

'All right,' Sophie said.

While Jennie helped move Sophie's legs into position, Ella pressed on Sophie's abdomen just above her pubic bone. It wasn't quite enough to release the baby's stuck shoulder, and she sighed inwardly. 'Sophie, I'm afraid her shoulder's still stuck. I'm going to need to give you an episiotomy to help me get the baby out.'

'I don't care,' Sophie said, 'as long as my baby's all right.'

Which was what Ella was worried about. There was a risk of Sophie tearing and having a postpartum haemorrhage—but more worrying still was that the brachial plexus, a bundle of nerves in the baby's shoulder and arm, could be stretched too much during the birth and be damaged.

'OK. You'll feel a sharp scratch as I give you some local anaesthetic,' Ella said as she worked. 'And you won't feel the episiotomy at all.' Swiftly, she made the incision and then finally managed to deliver the baby's head.

'Here we go—I think someone's all ready to meet her mum.' She clamped the cord, cut it, and handed the baby to Sophie while mentally assessing the baby's Apgar score.

'Oh, she's so beautiful—my baby,' Sophie said.

The baby yelled, and everyone in the room smiled. 'That's what we like to hear,' Ella said softly. 'Welcome to the world, baby.'

While Ella stitched up the episiotomy, the neonatal specialist checked the baby over. 'I'm pleased to say you have a very healthy little girl,' she said. 'She's absolutely fine.'

Ella helped Sophie get the baby latched on, and the baby took a couple of sucks before falling fast asleep.

'We'll get you settled back on the ward, Sophie,' Ella said. 'But if you're worried about anything at all, at any time, you just call one of us.'

'I will. And thank you,' Sophie said, tears running down her face. 'I'm so glad she's here.'



Oliver called in to one of the side rooms to see Hestia Blythe; he'd delivered her baby the previous evening by Caesarean section, after a long labour that had failed to progress and then the baby had started showing signs of distress.

'How are you both doing?' he asked with a smile.

'Fine, thanks.' Hestia smiled back at him. 'I'm a little bit sore, and I'm afraid I made a bit of a fuss earlier.' She grimaced. 'I feel so stupid, especially because I know how busy the midwives are and I should've just shut up and let them get on with helping people who really need it.'

'You're a new mum who needed a bit of help—you're allowed to make a fuss until you get used to doing things,' Oliver said. 'Nobody minds.'

She gave him a rueful look. 'I needed help to get my knickers on this morning after my shower and it was so, so pathetic. I actually cried my eyes out about it. I mean—how feeble is that?'

'You're not the first and you definitely won't be the last. Remember, you had twenty-four hours of labour and then an emergency section,' Oliver said. 'I'd be very surprised if you didn't need help with things for a day or two. And the tears are perfectly normal with all the hormones rushing round your body.'

'That's what that lovely midwife said—Ella—she was so kind,' Hestia told him. 'She said it was the baby blues kicking in early and everything will seem much better in a couple of days.'

'She's right. When you've had a bit of sleep and a chance to get over the operation, you'll feel a lot more settled,' Oliver agreed. And, yes, Ella was lovely with the patients. He'd noticed that even the most panicky new mums seemed to calm down around her.

'May I have a look at your scar, to see how you're healing?' he asked.

Hestia nodded. 'You kind of lose all your ideas of dignity when you have a baby, don't you?'

He smiled. 'We do try not to make you feel awkward about things, so please tell me if anything I say or do makes you uncomfortable. We want to make your stay here at Teddy's as good as it can be.'

'I didn't mean that,' she said, 'more that you don't feel shy or embarrassed about things any more—you get used to people looking at all the bits of you that aren't normally on view!'

'There is that,' Oliver agreed. He examined her scar. 'I'm pleased to say it looks as if you're healing very nicely. How's the baby?'

'He's feeding really well,' Hestia said. 'I found it a bit tricky to manage at first, but Ella sat down with me and showed me how to get the baby to latch on. She was really patient with me.'

'That's great. May I?' He indicated the crib next to the bed.

'Of course.'

Obviously she saw the goofy smile on his face when he looked at the baby because she said, 'You can pick him up and have a cuddle, if you like.'

'Yes, please.' Oliver grinned. 'This is one of my favourite parts of the job, cuddling a little one I helped to bring into the world. Hello, little man. How are you doing?' He lifted the baby tenderly and stroked the baby's cheek.

The baby yawned and opened his gorgeous dark blue eyes.

It was always a moment Oliver loved, when a newborn returned his gaze. But today it felt particularly special—because in a few months he knew he'd be doing this with his own baby. 'He's gorgeous, Hestia.'

'You're a natural at holding them,' Hestia said. 'Is that from your job, or do you have babies of your own?'

'My job,' he said. Though now he was going to have a baby of his own. And, the more he thought about the idea, the more it brought a smile to his face.

A baby.

His and Ella's.

Right now they weren't quite seeing eye to eye, but he'd make more of an effort. Because this really could work. He liked Ella and he knew she liked him. They were attracted to each other, or Hallowe'en wouldn't have happened. And love...? Oliver had stopped believing in that a long time ago. But he thought they could make a good life together, for the baby's sake.

He just needed to convince Ella.

'I was wondering,' Hestia said. 'My husband and I were talking, this morning, and you were so good with us last night. If it wasn't for you, we might not have our little boy now. And we'd like to name the baby after you. If that's all right?' she added.

'I'd be honoured,' Oliver said. 'Though I wasn't the only one in Theatre with you, so it'd be a bit greedy of me to take all the glory.'

'You were the one who saved our baby,' Hestia insisted. She peered over at his name tag. 'Oliver. That's such a lovely name.'

Oliver stared down at the baby. If Ella had a boy, would she want to call him Oliver? Or maybe Oliver as a middle name?

The baby started to grizzle and turn his head to the side. 'It looks as if someone's hungry.' He handed little Oliver over to his mum. 'Are you OK latching on now, or would you like me to get one of the midwives?'

'I'll manage—you've all been so great,' Hestia said.

'Good. If you need anything, let us know OK?'

'I will,' she promised. 'But right now all I can think about is my little Oliver here. And how he's the best Christmas present I could've asked for.'

Oliver smiled at her and left the room.

The best Christmas present I could've asked for.

In a way, that was what Ella had given him.

Needing to see her, he went in search of her.

'She's writing up her notes from her last delivery in the office,' Jennie, one of their trainee midwives, told him. 'The baby had shoulder dystocia.'

Which meant extra forms, Oliver knew. 'Did everything go OK?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' He headed for the midwives' office. Ella was sitting at the desk; as usual, she'd dictated something first into her phone, and it looked as if she was listening to her notes and then typing them up a few words at a time. Oliver knew from reading Ella's file that she was dyslexic; he assumed that this was the way she'd learned to manage it, and it was also the reason why she wore coloured glasses when she was reading notes or sitting at a computer.

He rapped on the glass panel of the door to get her attention, then opened it and leaned round it. 'Hi. I hear you just had a baby with shoulder dystocia.'

She nodded. 'There were absolutely no signs of it beforehand. The baby weighed three and a half kilograms and the mum didn't have gestational diabetes.'

'Prediction models aren't much help, as they're based on the baby's actual weight rather than the predicted weight, so don't blame yourself for it. In half of shoulder dystocia cases, we don't have a clue in advance, plus not all of them are big babies or from diabetic mothers,' Oliver said. 'How did it go?'

'Fine. As soon as I realised what was happening, I asked Jennie to get Charlie, the anaesthetist and the neonatal specialist. The McRoberts manoeuvre didn't quite work so I had to give her an episiotomy and guide the baby out, but the baby was fine and there's no sign of a brachial plexus injury. I'm going to keep an eye on Sophie—the mum—for postpartum haemorrhage.'

'Good job.' She looked so tired right now, Oliver thought. Having to concentrate on typing must be hard for her. 'Do you want a hand filling in the shoulder dystocia form?'

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'I'm not that hopeless, Oliver.'

And then the penny dropped. She obviously worried that people thought she was less than capable because of her dyslexia. Maybe in the past people had treated her as if she was stupid; that would explain why she'd overreacted to him buying the folic acid, because it had made her feel that he thought she was stupid.

'You're not hopeless at all, but you look tired,' he said, 'and filling in forms is a hassle even if you don't have to struggle with dyslexia as well.' He remembered what Ella's tutor said in her reference:

ignore the exam results because Ella was an excellent midwife and could always tell you every last detail of a case. It just took her a lot longer than most to write it up. The exams must've been a real struggle for her, even if she'd been given extra time or the help of a scribe during the papers. And yet she'd never once given up. 'You could always dictate it to me and I'll type it up for you,' he suggested.

She narrowed her eyes even further. 'Would you make the same offer to anyone else on your team?'

She was worried about him showing favouritism towards her because of the baby? 'Actually, yes, I would,' he said. 'That's the point. We're a team, at Teddy's. And I'm responsible for my team's well-being. Which includes you.' He pulled up a chair next to her, brought the keyboard in front of him and angled the screen so they could both see it. 'Right. Tell me what to type.'

Again she looked wary, and he thought she was going to argue with him; but then she nodded and dictated everything to him. Just as he'd expected, she was meticulous and accurate.

'Thank you,' she said when he'd finished typing.

'Any time. You know your stuff and you pay attention to our mums, so you made that really easy for me.' But she looked so tired, almost forlorn, and it worried him. He wanted to make things better. Now. He gave in to the impulse and rested his palm against her cheek. 'Tell me what you need.'

'Need?'

Her pupils were suddenly huge and his mouth went dry. Was she going to say that she needed him? Because, right now, he needed her, too. Wanted to hold her. Wanted to kiss her.

When she said nothing, he rubbed his thumb lightly against her skin. 'Cup of tea? Sandwich? Because I'm guessing the staff kitchen is a no-go area for you right now.'

'I'd love a cup of tea,' she admitted. 'And a sandwich. Anything really, really bland.'

'Give me five minutes,' he said. 'And, for the record, I'm not trying to be bossy. You've had a busy shift with a tough delivery, and I bet you haven't had the chance of a break today. I want to be there for you and our baby, Ella.'



He'd said the magic word, Ella thought as she watched Oliver leave the office. 'Our', not 'my'. So maybe she wasn't going to have to fight him for her independence.

He came back with the perfect cup of tea, a cheese sandwich and an apple that he'd cored and sliced for her. Ella felt her eyes fill with tears. 'Oh, Oliver.'

'Don't cry.'

But she couldn't stop the tears spilling over. He wrapped his arms round her, holding her close and making her feel cherished and protected, and that only made her want to cry more.

Hormones, that was all it was. And if someone came into the office and saw them, people might start to talk. Although Ella dearly wanted to stay in his arms, she wriggled free. 'Oliver. People are going to start gossiping if they see us like this.'

'No—they'll think you're tired after a long shift, and I'm doing exactly what I would for any colleague. Being supportive.'

'I guess.' She paused. 'I've got an appointment through for the scan.'

He went very still. 'Are you asking me to come with you?'

'If you want to.'

There was a brief flash of hunger in his eyes. Did that mean he wanted to be there, or did he think it was his duty? She didn't have a clue how he felt about her, and she wasn't ready to ask—just in case the answer was that he saw it as his duty.

'But if anyone asks why, it's because you're supporting your colleague,' she said. 'I'm not ready for the world to know about—well.' She shrugged. There wasn't an 'us'. What should she call it? A fling? A mistake? The most stupid thing she'd ever done in her life?

And yet the end result had been something she'd always thought was beyond her reach. The most precious gift of all. Something that made her heart sing every time she thought about the baby.

'Noted,' he said, his voice expressionless. 'What time?'

'Eleven.'

'I'll be there,' he said. 'Do you want me to meet you in the waiting area outside the ultrasound room, or here?'

'I think the waiting area would be best.' If they went together from here, their colleagues were bound to start speculating, and she really didn't want that. Not until she knew what was really happening between her and Oliver.

'All right.'

'I guess I'd better finish writing up my notes,' she said. 'And then I want to check on Sophie—the mum—to see how she and the baby are doing. And I promised to give a hand with putting up the Christmas decorations in the reception area.'

'I'll let you get on, then.' For a moment, he looked as if he was going to say something else. Then he shook his head as if he'd changed his mind. 'I'll catch you later.'

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, Ella woke with butterflies in her stomach. The pregnancy test she'd taken had been positive; but as a midwife she knew that there were all manner of things that could go wrong over the next few weeks. One in four pregnancies ended in a miscarriage. And would the scarring in her Fallopian tubes have caused a problem with the baby?

She managed to force down a slice of toast and was sitting in the waiting room outside the ultrasound suite at five minutes to eleven, having drunk the requested one litre of water. There were Christmas cards pinned on the cork board in the reception area, and some of the tables had been moved to make way for a tree. All the couples sitting in the waiting room now were clearly looking forward to the following Christmas: the first Christmas with their new baby. Right now, Ella didn't know if she and the baby would still be here in Cheltenham with Oliver, or whether they'd be back in Ireland with her family, and it made her feel slightly melancholy.

Would Oliver be on time for the appointment? Or would he need to be in with a patient and have to miss the scan?

She reminded herself that it didn't matter if he couldn't be there; she could manage this perfectly well on her own. She tried to flick through one of the magazines left on the table to distract people who were waiting, but the paper was too shiny for her to be able to read the words easily.

And that was another worry: would her baby inherit her dyslexia? Ella knew that a daughter would have a one in four chance of inheriting the condition, and a son would have a three in four chance. She hated the idea that she could've passed on something that would cause her child difficulties in the future; though at least she was aware of what to look out for, so if necessary she'd be able to get help for her child much earlier than she'd received help, and her child wouldn't go through most of his or her education feeling as clumsy and stupid as Ella had.

She'd just put the magazine back on the table when she heard Oliver say, 'Good morning.'

She looked up and her heart skipped a beat. He really was beautiful: the walking definition of tall, dark and handsome. And she'd never reacted to someone as strongly as she reacted to Oliver.

'Good morning,' she said, trying to sound cool and collected and hoping that he didn't pick up how flustered he made her feel.

'Are you all right? Is there anything I can get you?'

'Thanks, but I'm fine. And, before you ask, yes, I've drunk all the water they asked me to.'

'Let's hope they're running on time so you're not uncomfortable for too long. May I?' He gestured to the chair next to her.

'Of course.' And how ridiculous it was that she longed for him to take her hand, the way that the partners of the other pregnant women in the waiting room seemed to have done. She had to remember that their relationship was limited to an unplanned and inconvenient shared status as a parent: they weren't a proper couple. They probably never would be. The best she could hope for was that Oliver would be there for the baby as he or she grew up. It would be stupid to dream that the man who'd held her yesterday afternoon when she'd cried, the man she was falling for just a little more each day, felt the same way about her. Yesterday he'd been kind, that was all.

A few minutes later, they were called into the ultrasound suite. As they walked into the dimly lit room, the sonographer said, 'Oh, Mr Darrington! I didn't expect to see you.' She looked speculatively at Ella. 'I didn't realise—'

'I'm supporting Ella,' Oliver cut in, 'as I'd support any member of my team whose family lives a long way away.'

'Oh, of course.' The sonographer blushed. 'I'm sorry for—well, making assumptions.'

Ella had wanted to keep everything just between the two of them, but at the same time she felt a prickle of hurt that Oliver hadn't acknowledged the fact that this was his baby, and had fudged

it in a way so that he hadn't lied directly but had definitely misdirected the sonographer. She knew it was contrary and ridiculous of her to feel that way, and it was probably due to all the pregnancy hormones rushing round her system. How many times had she had to comfort a pregnant woman in their department who was upset for a totally irrational reason?

Following instructions, she lay on the couch and bared her stomach. The sonographer tucked tissue paper round Ella's clothes to stop them being covered in gel, then put radio-conductive gel on her stomach.

'It's warm,' Ella said in surprise. 'The gel is always cold if we do a scan on the ward.'

The sonographer smiled. 'It always is warm down here because of all the machinery heating up the room. I think it makes things a bit more comfortable for the mums.'

'I agree. We'll have to think of a way of doing that on the ward,' Ella said to Oliver.

The sonographer ran the head of the transceiver over Ella's stomach. 'Good. I can confirm there's just one baby here.'

Ella hadn't even considered that she might be having twins. She had no idea if twins ran in Oliver's family, but she could hardly ask him right then—not without adding to the hospital rumour mill.

'The baby's growing nicely,' the sonographer said, and took some measurements on the screen. 'It's about thirteen millimetres long, so I'd say you're about seven and a half weeks.'

'That ties in with my dates,' Ella said.

'You can see the baby's head and body very clearly.' The sonographer turned the screen round to show them a bean-shaped blob; there was a flicker which Ella knew was the baby's heartbeat. And she was shocked by the rush of sheer emotion that burst through her at the very first sight of her baby.

'The baby's heart rate is one hundred and fifty beats per minute—which you'll know as a midwife is absolutely fine. It's too early to measure the fluid behind the neck for a Nuchal test, as we'd usually do that at about eleven weeks, but we can do a combined screening test for Down's then,' the sonographer said.

Ella only realised then that she'd been holding her breath, waiting to know that everything was all right and her fertility problems hadn't also caused a problem for the baby. 'Thank you. It's really good to know all's well.'

There was a knock on the door and another member of the ultrasound team put her head round the door. 'Sorry to interrupt—can I have a quick word?'

The sonographer went over for a brief discussion. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I just need to pop next door for a moment. I'll be back very soon.'

'Not a problem,' Ella said, feeling a tug of sympathy for whoever was in the other ultrasound room. For the senior sonographer to be called in, it meant the team needed a second opinion on a potential complication.

As the door closed, Oliver took her hand. 'Our baby,' he said in wonder, looking at the screen. 'I've seen so many of these scans since I started working as an ob-gyn, and even performed a few of them myself, but this... This is special.' His voice sounded thick with emotion.

'I know.' It had affected Ella in the same way, and she was amazed by how strongly she felt. She'd only known about this baby for three days and it had turned her world upside down; but at the same time it was the most precious gift anyone could've given her and she was already bonding with the tiny being growing in her womb. She couldn't help tightening her fingers round his.

'Our baby, Ella,' he said again, his voice hoarse, and cupped her face with his free hand.

His touch sent a tingle through her. 'Oliver,' she whispered.

He dipped his head to kiss her; it was soft and sweet and full of longing.

When he broke the kiss, he pulled back just far enough so they could look into each other's eyes. Ella noticed that his pupils were huge. Was it because of the low light in the ultrasound room,

or was it because he felt as emotional as she did right at that moment? Did he feel this same pull towards her that she felt towards him? Did they have a chance to make it as a couple—as a family?

‘Ella,’ he said softly, and kissed her again.

Her heart felt as if it had just done a somersault.

But then they heard the click of the door starting to open, and pulled apart again. Ella felt her cheeks burning, and really hoped that the sonographer hadn’t seen anything—or, worse still, that she looked as if she’d just been thoroughly kissed.

Oliver looked both shocked and horrified. Ella could tell instantly that he was regretting the kiss and shrivelled a little inside. How stupid of her to hope that the kiss meant he felt something for her. Clearly he’d just got carried away by the rush of the moment.

‘Sorry about that,’ the sonographer said brightly. ‘I guess as you work in Teddy’s, Ella, you already know the answers to the kind of questions my mums normally ask, but is there anything you’d like to ask?’

Ella smiled. ‘I’m not going to ask to know whether the baby’s a girl or a boy, because apart from the fact I know it’s way too early for you to be able to tell, it doesn’t matter either way to me.’ Though, she wondered, did it make a difference to Oliver? ‘But would it be possible to have a photograph, please?’

‘Sure. Let’s see if we can get you a slightly less blurry picture,’ the sonographer said with a smile. Once she’d got a picture she was happy with, she asked, ‘How many copies do you need?’

‘Two,’ Ella said. ‘How much are they?’

Before Oliver could embarrass them both by trying to pay, she took out her purse and handed over the money.

The photographs were printed while she wiped her abdomen free of gel and restored order to her clothes.

‘Thank you for your support, Oliver,’ she said. ‘I know you’re really busy, so you don’t have to hang around and wait for me.’



It was practically a dismissal. So Ella was obviously regretting their kiss, Oliver thought. And she was probably right. They could do with some space. He’d got carried away in the heat of the moment, overwhelmed by seeing the baby on the screen. Right now he needed to take a step back from Ella, metaphorically as well as literally.

‘Thanks. I’ll see you later on the ward,’ he said.

But before he had a chance to leave the sonographer was called next door again.

‘Ella,’ he said, his voice low and urgent. ‘What happened just now—it shouldn’t have done. I apologise.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Her voice was very cool.

And he deserved that coolness. It was all his fault. ‘I guess I lost my head a bit. It was the excitement of seeing the baby on the screen and hearing the positive news.’

‘We both got carried away,’ Ella agreed. ‘It won’t happen again.’ She gestured to the prints. ‘I assume you’d like one of these?’

‘I would.’ It shocked him how very much he wanted the picture. Their baby. ‘Thank you,’ he said when she handed one to him.

‘It’s the least I could do.’

‘I owe you—’ he began.

‘It’s fine. A print of a scan isn’t going to bankrupt me.’

That wasn’t what he’d meant at all. ‘Ella...’ He sighed, seeing the determined set of her jaw. ‘OK. I’ll see you later. And thank you for the photograph.’ He wasn’t ready to share the news with

anyone yet, but having the picture made everything so much more real. He tucked it into his wallet and left the room.

And he'd really have to get his head together.

He'd had no right to kiss her. The reason her fingers had tightened round his was purely because she was emotional about the baby. Seeing the little life they'd created, the strength of the baby's beating heart. That was all.

She wasn't in love with him.

And he wasn't in love with her, he told himself firmly. The attraction he felt towards her was because of the baby, rooted in responsibility rather than passion. He needed to be fair to her and leave her free to find someone else. Someone who hadn't put their heart in permafrost and would be able to give her the love she deserved.

But he'd meet every single one of his responsibilities towards the baby, and he needed to find a good working relationship with Ella, so their child never felt unwanted or a burden. They definitely needed to talk. Later—he really needed to gather his thoughts first.



Annabelle beckoned Ella into her office as she walked past. 'So how did it go?'

Ella beamed and took the scan picture from her purse. 'Look at this! I know, I know, it's too soon to see anything more than a bean-shaped blob.'

'It's gorgeous,' Annabelle said, looking slightly wistful.

Ella bit her lip. 'Oh, Annabelle, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to open up old wounds.' But she'd so wanted to share the picture with someone who'd understand how excited she was.

'You haven't upset me in the slightest,' Annabelle hugged her. 'I'm thrilled for you. Really, truly and honestly.'

'Thank you.' Ella tucked the picture back into her purse.

'So what's the situation between you and Oliver?' Annabelle asked.

'Complicated,' Ella admitted. Even though Annabelle was her best friend, Ella wasn't going to tell her about that kiss today. Oliver had apologised for it and said he'd got carried away in the heat of the moment and it was a mistake, so it'd be pointless for her to wish that it had meant anything more.

'Are you a couple, or not?'

'Not,' Ella said.

'Do you want to be?' Annabelle asked.

That was the crunch question. And the worst part was that Ella couldn't really answer it. 'I don't know. I like him, Annabelle—I like him a lot—but I don't want to lose my independence. I worked so hard to qualify as a midwife, and I hate the way Oliver just expects me to cut back on my shifts and do whatever he says. He obviously hasn't even thought about what it's going to do to my career.'

'I think,' Annabelle said, 'you need to talk to him.'

'You're right. I know,' Ella agreed.

'But, before that,' Annabelle said gently, 'you need to work out what you really want.'

And that was going to be the really hard part. Because right at that moment Ella wanted everything—and she knew that was way too much to ask.



That evening, when she got home, Ella video-called her parents.

'Is everything all right, darling?' Roisin O'Brien asked. 'You always call us on a Thursday, and today's only Tuesday.'

'I know. Mam, I have some news.'

Roisin beamed and asked hopefully, 'You're coming back to Ireland and going to work in the hospital in Limerick?'

Ella smiled. 'Mam, you know I love it here at Teddy's. No, it's not to do with work. Is Da there? Because I need to talk to you both together.'

'Is everything all right?' Roisin asked again.

'Yes.' And no, but she wasn't going to say that.

'Joe! Joe, our Ella's on the computer to talk to us,' Roisin called.

Joe appeared on Ella's screen, next to his wife. 'And how's my beautiful girl, then?'

Ella felt the tears well up. 'Oh, Da.'

Joe looked horrified. 'Ella? Whatever's the matter? I'll hop on the plane and be right over. You just say th—'

'No, Da, it's fine,' she cut in. She swallowed hard. 'Mam, Da—there isn't an easy way to say this, so I'll do what you always say and tell it to you straight. You're going to be grandparents.'

There was a stunned silence for a moment, and then Roisin said, 'But, Ella, the doctors in London said...' Her voice trailed off, and Ella knew what her mother didn't want to voice. The doctors in London had said Ella would never be able to have a child of her own.

'They got it wrong.' Ella picked up the scan photo and held it so her parents could see it. 'I had the scan today—I'm seven and a half weeks. You can't see a lot, just a bean shape, but the sonographer said everything looked fine and the baby's heart was beating just right.'

'We're going to be grandparents.' Joe and Roisin hugged each other.

'You're not angry with me?' Ella asked. 'Because—well, this wasn't supposed to happen?'

'So the baby wasn't planned. It doesn't mean he or she won't be loved to bits,' Roisin said. 'Lots of babies aren't planned. It's grand news, Ella. What about the baby's da? When do we get to meet him?'

Ella hadn't even considered that. 'I'm not sure,' she said carefully. 'It's complicated.'

'Do I need to come and talk to the lad and remind him of his responsibilities?' Joe asked, folding his arms.

'No, Da, and that's not why I called. I just wanted you both to know about the baby. It's early days and a lot of things could still go wrong—but I love you so much and I couldn't keep the news to myself any longer. Please don't say anything to anyone else in the family, not yet—not till I'm twelve weeks, OK?'

'All right. And we love you, too, Ella,' Roisin said. 'If you want us to move over to England to help you with the baby, you just say the word. Or if you want to come home, you've always got a home with us and so has the baby.'

'Oh, Mam.' Ella swallowed back the tears.

'So what does the young man in question have to say for himself?' Joe asked.

'He was at the scan with me today. He's very responsible,' Ella said, guessing what her father was worrying about. She smiled. 'He's trying to wrap me up in cotton wool as much as you do.'

'With about as much success, I'll bet,' Roisin said. 'You get your independent streak from your Granny O'Connor.'

'And your Granny O'Brien,' Joe added, not to be outdone.

Ella laughed. 'Oh, I miss you both so much.'

'You'll be home in a couple of weeks for Christmas,' Roisin said, 'and we can give you a proper hug then. Are you keeping well in yourself?'

'Just a bit of morning sickness.'

'You need crackers by your bedside,' Roisin began, then laughed. 'Hark at me trying to give a midwife advice on pregnancy.'

'You're my Mam,' Ella said. 'Of course you'll tell me, and when I get home you know I want to know everything about when you were pregnant with me.'

'She'll talk the hind leg off a donkey,' Joe said.

'As if you won't, too, Joe O'Brien,' Roisin teased back.

'You sort things out with your young man,' Joe said, 'and you bring him home with you for Christmas so we can give him a proper welcome to the family.'

'I'll try,' Ella said. And she knew her parents meant it. They'd definitely welcome Oliver. Her 'young man'. She couldn't help smiling. If only. 'I love you, Da. And you, Mam.'

'We love you, too,' Roisin said. 'Can we have a copy of that photo—our first picture of our grandbaby?'

'I'll scan it in and send it tonight,' Ella promised. 'As soon as we've finished our video call.'

'Good night, darling,' Roisin said. 'And you call us any time, you hear?'

'I hear. Love you,' Ella said, and ended the call.

It had made her homesick, and she was tearful again by the time she scanned in the photograph and emailed it over to her parents. Part of her wanted to call Oliver and ask him to come with her to Ireland for Christmas; but he probably already had plans. Plans that wouldn't include her. She'd just have to take this whole thing day by day, and hope that things would get easier between them.



Oliver brooded about the situation with Ella and the baby for the rest of Tuesday. It didn't help when he had a text from his mother, asking him if he could please confirm whether he was going to come to the drinks party at Darrington Hall on Thursday night.

He hadn't been to his parents' annual pre-Christmas drinks party for years. But maybe it was time he tried to thaw out his relationship with his family. Particularly as he was about to become a father.

How would his family react to the news? He had no idea. Would they expect him to settle down? Would they try to use the baby as an excuse to make him leave the hospital and spend his time working with his brother, instead of doing the job he'd trained for years and years to do? Would it be the thing that brought them back together again? Or would their awkward relationship be like a marriage under strain and crack even further under the extra pressure of a baby?

It was all such a mess.

It would help if he knew what Ella wanted. Did she regret what had happened between them? Or would she be prepared to try and make a life together?

He didn't have a clue.

And he didn't even know how to begin to ask.

CHAPTER FIVE

BY WEDNESDAY MORNING, the frustration was too much for Oliver. Usually he was self-contained, but right now he really needed to talk this over, preferably with someone he could trust to keep this to themselves.

The best person he could think of was Sebastian. Prince Sebastian Falco of Montanari had been one of his best friends since they'd met during Seb's first week at university, when Oliver had been nearing the end of his medical degree; they'd hit it off immediately, despite the four-year difference in their ages. Given his position as the heir to the kingdom of Montanari, Sebastian knew about the importance of privacy. And it didn't matter that Sebastian and Oliver hadn't actually seen each other for a few months; they always picked up their friendship exactly where they'd left off.

Oliver looked at the scan photograph again, then picked up his mobile phone and called Sebastian's private number.

To his relief the prince answered immediately. 'Hello, Olly. How are you?'

All over the place. Not that Oliver was going to admit it. 'Fine, fine,' he fibbed. 'Seb, have I caught you in the middle of something, or do you have a few minutes?'

'I've probably got about ten minutes,' Sebastian said ruefully, 'and then I really do have to be in a meeting. It's good to hear from you, Olly. How are things?'

'Complicated,' Oliver said wryly.

'Would this be as in female complications?' Sebastian asked. 'Or is it the new job?'

'Both—and thank you for the case of champagne, by the way.'

'It's the least I could do,' Sebastian said. 'So what are these complications? I take it that's why you're ringing me—to get an impartial point of view?'

'And a bit of perspective.' Oliver blew out a breath. He really didn't know where to start. Or maybe he should just do the whole mixed-up lot at once. 'It's crazy at work, what with the winter vomiting virus wiping out half the staff, and Sienna's going on maternity leave any day now. And I'm going to be a father.'

There was silence on the other end of the line.

'Seb? Are you still there?'

Was his friend really that shocked by the news of Oliver's impending fatherhood? Oh, hell. That didn't bode well for his family's reaction. Sebastian was much more laid back than Oliver's parents.

'Sorry, Olly. Someone needed me for a second. You were saying, half of your department's having babies?' Sebastian asked.

'Not half of us—that's the virus wiping everyone out—though it does feel as if everyone's going on leave. Just Sienna. Obviously you know her from when she did the training at the hospital for you.'

'Yes. She did a good job—thank you for recommending her.'

There was something in Sebastian's voice that Oliver couldn't quite work out. Or maybe it wasn't the best line. He didn't always get great mobile phone reception in his office.

'So Sienna got married when she came back to England?' Sebastian asked.

'No, she's still single. But she knows we're all there for her and she's got a very willing rota of babysitters when the baby arrives. It's due somewhere around the beginning of February.'

'I see.' There was a pause. 'So you're going to be a dad. Should I be offering congratulations or commiserations?'

'Both,' Oliver said wryly. 'Though at least this one's definitely mine.'

'Not a repeat of Justine, then.'

Trust Sebastian to come straight to the point. It was one of the things that Oliver appreciated about his friend: his ability to focus on the important thing and cut through all the irrelevancies. 'No. And Ella's nothing like Justine. She's open and honest. And very independent.'

‘So she won’t let you boss her about.’

Oliver knew his friend was teasing him—or was he? Was he really as overbearing and bossy as Ella said he was?

‘When’s the baby due?’ Sebastian asked.

‘In seven and a half months.’

‘It’s very early days, then.’

‘Yes. Ella only told me a few days ago. She had the dating scan yesterday. Seeing the baby’s heart beating on the screen...’ It had been a real game-changer. Because now everything was real. His baby. And he wanted to be a much better father than his own father had been.

Yet wasn’t he making the same mistakes? Insisting that everything should go his way? It was a knee-jerk reaction to the way Justine had behaved—and Ella deserved better.

‘So what’s the complication with the baby’s mum?’ Sebastian asked.

Trust the prince to ask the awkward question. ‘It’s tricky. I’m not her direct boss, but I’m the Assistant Head of the Department.’

‘Well, it wouldn’t be the first workplace romance in history.’

When Oliver didn’t reply, Sebastian continued, ‘I assume it is a romance?’

‘Yes and no.’ Oliver sighed. ‘I admit, I’ve been attracted to her since the moment I met her. She’s gorgeous—all soft curves and red hair and green eyes.’

‘The way you describe her makes her sound like a Picasso painting,’ Sebastian commented dryly.

Oliver laughed. ‘Hardly. It’s not just how she looks—I’m not that shallow. She’s nice. I can be myself with her. But you know I don’t do relationships. So I’ve kept it platonic.’

‘Obviously something changed, or you wouldn’t be preparing for fatherhood in seven and a half months’ time,’ Sebastian pointed out.

‘I danced with her at the annual Hallowe’en charity ball. Then I gave her a lift home.’ Which sounded pathetic. ‘I meant to see her safely indoors and leave, but she invited me in for coffee. And then I just gave in to the urge to kiss her, and...’ Oliver sighed. ‘I guess one thing led to another.’

‘How does she feel about you?’

Good question. One Oliver had been asking himself rather a lot, and he hadn’t quite worked out the answer. ‘I don’t honestly know. Obviously there’s something there between us, or we wouldn’t be in the position we’re in now. But the baby has complicated things a bit. I don’t know whether she wants me for me,’ he said, ‘or if she wants me for the baby’s sake.’

‘Have you tried asking her?’

‘No—because, if I’m honest, it’s the same for me. I don’t know if I want to be with her because I want her, or because I feel responsible for the baby.’ Though he wasn’t going to tell Sebastian about the kiss during the scan. That complicated things even more. Had they both been caught up in the moment, the excitement of seeing the little life on screen? Or were they both trying to deny the inevitable? Were they meant to be together?

And then there was the issue of why she’d been so sure that he hadn’t needed to use contraception. He still hadn’t got to the bottom of that. He didn’t think Ella was a gold-digger, but there was definitely something she was keeping from him, and he hadn’t found the right way to ask her about it without causing a fight. ‘Right now, everything’s mixed up.’

‘I guess only time will tell,’ Sebastian said. ‘Just make sure you keep the lines of communication open.’

Oliver knew that was sound advice. ‘I will.’

‘Have you told your family yet?’

‘No. It’s too early.’

‘Fair enough,’ Sebastian paused. ‘Does Ella know about your family?’

The crunch question. Sebastian knew Oliver kept his background quiet at work, and why. 'No,' Oliver admitted.

'You're going to have to tell her at some point. And then. Especially if she's going to be a part of your future.'

'I know.' He'd been thinking about that. He needed to introduce Ella to his family; and, given that they seemed to be reaching out to him right now, maybe their attitude towards his career might have mellowed and they'd accept him for who he was rather than who they wanted him to be. 'My mother wants me to go to the annual Darrington pre-Christmas cocktail party.'

'Then go,' Sebastian said.

'You know I haven't been for years.' He hated all that meet-and-greet stuff.

'Things are different now. You need to introduce Ella to them. And,' Sebastian counselled, 'a party where there are a lot of people around would be a useful way of doing that.'

'You mean, it's in public so my parents will have to behave impeccably, and there will be enough other people there to dilute them?'

'I didn't say that.' But Oliver could almost hear the smile in his friend's voice, because they both knew what his family was like. Appearances mattered to the Darringtons. Sebastian, being a prince, was perfect friend material in their eyes. Ella came from a very different background, and it probably wouldn't go down well.

Oliver didn't need his parents to approve of Ella. Their relationship—if they could make it a real relationship—was just between the two of them. But he was starting to realise that family was important. Was there a place for his family in his future? Could they learn from the mistakes of the past and build some bridges?

'Olly, I really have to go,' Sebastian said. 'Sorry. I'll call you back when I'm out of my meeting.'

'I'll probably be in a meeting then myself, or in Theatre,' Oliver said. 'But you don't need to call me back, Seb. I think you've already helped me work out the best way forward. Thank you.'

'Any time. Good luck,' Sebastian said. 'And keep me posted on how things go.'

'I will. And thanks again.'

Once he'd put the phone down, Oliver texted his mother.

Confirm will be there on Tomorrow. May I bring a guest? There's someone I'd like you to meet.

The reply came back.

Of course. Look forward to meeting her.

Grilling her, more like, he thought. He definitely wouldn't leave Ella on her own at Darrington Hall. Even if she did protest that he was wrapping her in cotton wool.



'Mummy, look, it's Santa!' The little boy tugged at his mum's hand and pointed to the room on the other side of the floor, and Ella couldn't help smiling at the excitement on his face.

'Santa'—often one of the consultants in a borrowed suit—paid a brief visit to Teddy's every Wednesday afternoon in December, to see the siblings of all the new babies on the ward. The Friends of the Hospital group had raised money for gifts appropriate for different ages—a soft toy, colouring pencils and a pad, or a reading book—and it helped to make the older siblings feel that they were still special despite the new arrival in the family.

So who was it today? Oliver? Max?

Definitely not Oliver, because a couple of minutes later he came striding along the corridor. He paused in the doorway when he saw Ella, and smiled. 'OK?'

Ella nodded, and glanced back at the mum she'd been checking over. She was busy with the baby and talking to her toddler, so Ella stepped out for a second. 'You?'

'Yeah.'

'I wondered if you were, um, helping our friend in the red suit.'

He smiled. 'That would be next week.' For a moment, he took her hand and squeezed it. 'Next year, our baby will see Santa.'

His voice was low enough so that nobody else would've heard. And that touch, combined with the expression in his eyes and what he'd just said, sent a thrill right through her. Especially when he added, 'And I can't wait. I know five months is still a bit young, but...'

Did that mean he wanted to take the baby to see Santa on his own? Or did he mean the three of them as a family? Not that she could ask. Yesterday, he'd kissed her; but then he'd said it was a mistake. Right now they seemed to be taking one step forward and two steps back.

Or maybe this was her chance to sound him out a little more. 'The year after will be better,' she said. 'Because by then the baby will be talking and know what's going on.'

'We're so getting a train set for the second Christmas,' he said. 'Whether we have a girl or a boy. Wooden trains are the best fun.'

And she could just see him kneeling on the floor with their baby, helping their little one put the train tracks together. Her heart constricted. But would she be there with him?

'You're going to be an amazing mum,' he said. 'Singing nursery rhymes and telling stories with all the voices.'

He'd been thinking about the future, then? Just the baby, or about them too? She let herself get carried away with the fantasy that it was all of them. 'And you're going to be the dad who does all the scary stuff—the highest slide in the park, pushing the swings as fast as they'll go.'

'That sounds good to me,' he said. 'But not that scary. I'll always keep my own safe.'

Right at that second she wasn't sure whether he was talking about the baby or her. And she so wanted it to be both of them.

'Ella—can I borrow you for a second?' Jennie, their trainee midwife, asked.

Oh, help. Ella really hoped that Jennie hadn't overheard any of that conversation.

'Sure,' she said, keeping her fingers crossed that she didn't sound flustered. 'I'll just let my mum know I'll be with you for a little while before I finish writing up her notes. I think they're next for Santa, so they won't miss me. Catch you later, Oliver.'

'Later,' he agreed with a smile.

It was just a work pleasantry, that was all, she reminded herself. She might not even see him again before the end of her shift. But at least they hadn't been fighting. That had to be a start.



Once Ella had helped Jennie and finished writing up her notes, she was called to the birthing suite for another delivery. This was the best job in the world, she thought, watching the little family in front of her: the dad with tears of pride and joy in his eyes, the mum looking tired but radiant, and the baby cuddled up between them. To be able to share these first few precious minutes of a new life was so amazing.

The delivery had been free from complications, the baby had had a perfect Apgar score, and now the three of them were settled back on the ward.

Would Oliver cry when their baby arrived, the way this baby's dad had cried with sheer joy? Or would he be perfectly cool, calm and collected? Given what he'd said to her when Santa came onto the ward, she had a feeling it would be the former. And he had talked about next Christmas, so it sounded as if he wanted to be part of the baby's life.

There was still a lot they weren't saying to each other, but at least they weren't arguing. So maybe they'd manage to work things out between them.

She left the little family to bond and went to write up her notes in the quiet of the office.

She was halfway through when there was a rap on the door. She looked up to see Oliver standing in the doorway.

'Can I have a word?' he asked.

Her heart skipped a beat as she thought about the way he'd kissed her in the ultrasound room yesterday; but then she remembered how quick he'd been to dismiss it as a simple reaction to seeing the baby and hearing the good news. Despite what he'd said to her earlier today about their baby and next Christmas, they hadn't actually resolved their relationship. And she had to be objective about this. Oliver Darrington might be the father of her baby, but he wasn't in love with her. She'd be a fool to dream it would ever happen. She damped down the flare of desire. 'Sure,' she said, as coolly as she could. 'Though I'm in the middle of writing up the birth notes.'

'Did it go well?'

'Very. There were no complications, and I left the new mum and dad bonding with their little girl.' She smiled. 'The dad cried when she was born. It was so lovely to see how happy they were.' And oh, she had to stop talking. The last thing she wanted was for Oliver to guess how she was feeling. 'You wanted something?'

'Yes. What are you doing tomorrow?'

'Cleaning my flat,' she said, 'as it's my day off. And I really ought to do a bit of Christmas shopping. I'm a bit behind, this year.'

'Are you busy in the evening?' he asked.

'Why?'

'Because my parents are having a cocktail party.' He looked awkward. 'I wondered if you'd like to come with me.'

He wanted her to meet his parents?

Ella stared at him in surprise. 'Are you sure? I mean... They didn't invite me.'

'They have now. I asked if I could bring you.'

So he'd already talked to his family about her? Had he told them about the baby, despite the fact he'd suggested she shouldn't tell anyone until she was past the first trimester?

She pushed down the rising panic. Cocktail party, he'd said. She didn't know anyone who actually held cocktail parties. She knew that Oliver had quite a posh accent. But how posh exactly were they? Would she fit in?

As if he'd guessed what she was thinking, he said, 'It's not a big deal. Just a drinks party they hold every year before Christmas.'

It was an annual event? That sounded even scarier. 'It sounds a little bit fancy,' she said.

Oliver's face shuttered. 'All right. So you don't want to meet my family.'

She shook her head. 'No, that's not what I meant, Oliver. I was just thinking that it sounds like quite a big party and your parents will be busy. Wouldn't it be better if I met them at something a bit quieter and more low-key rather than a big event?' And something she could escape from more easily. 'Like, I don't know, meeting at a café in town for a cup of tea?'

'It's probably better,' he said, 'if there are a lot of people there.'

That sounded ominous. Did that mean he thought they were going to hate her, especially when they found out about the baby? Or did they already know about the baby and they weren't pleased?

Clearly her worries showed in her face because he said, 'What I mean is that my family can be a little bit pushy—I guess that's where I get my overbearing streak. I think the first time you meet them will be better if they're a bit diluted. They're the problem, not you.'

That didn't calm Ella's worries in the slightest. Particularly as she knew that her own family would welcome Oliver warmly when she introduced him to them. They'd draw him straight into the middle of things and treat him as if they'd known him for years and years. Her father had already said they wanted to welcome him to the family.

Clearly Oliver's family was very different, and she'd have to tread very carefully.

'Have you told them about the baby?' she asked.

'Not yet.'

'Because they won't approve of me?' The question burst out before she could stop it.

‘Because,’ he said, ‘it’s still early days. I’d prefer to wait until you’re safely through the first trimester before we tell my family about the baby.’

That was sensible; though it made her feel guilty that everyone in the department already knew. It felt wrong to be sharing this with their colleagues and not Oliver’s family, especially as she’d already shared the news with her own family. But how could she explain that? ‘OK.’ She paused. ‘So what do I wear? If it’s a big cocktail party...’

‘I’ll buy you a dress,’ Oliver said.

She frowned. ‘No—and that’s not why I asked. Is the dress I wore to the masked ball suitable?’

‘Yes, but I can b—’ he began.

‘No,’ she cut in. ‘You really don’t need to buy me a dress, Oliver. It’s a total waste to buy something you’re only ever going to wear to one thing.’

He sighed. ‘I’m being bossy again?’

She nodded.

‘Got it,’ he said. ‘Will you allow me to drive you to the party?’

‘Yes, but only because you know the way.’

‘All right.’ His grey eyes were unreadable. ‘I’ll pick you up tomorrow, then.’

‘What time do I need to be ready?’

‘The party starts at half-past seven, and it takes about an hour to get there. So I’ll pick you up at half-past six.’

‘I’ll be ready. Should I have dinner first?’

‘There will be nibbles there—but yes, I’d say grab a sandwich or something before I pick you up,’ Oliver said.

Ella noticed that he didn’t suggest eating together first, and pushed down the feeling of hurt. After all, she’d already accused him of being bossy. He’d probably thought she’d bite his head off if he suggested it. ‘All right. I’ll see you tomorrow then.’

She watched him walk out of the door. Had he just asked her on a date of sorts? Was he thinking about trying to make a go of things between them, and introducing her to his family was the first step? Or was this some kind of test she needed to pass?

‘You’re overthinking it, you numpty,’ she told herself crossly. She knew Oliver didn’t play games. He was simply introducing her to his family. Not as the mother of his child, but as... She didn’t quite know what as, but it was most likely he’d say she was his colleague or maybe his friend. And then, when he’d worked out how his family reacted to her, he’d find the right way to break the news about the baby. It was nothing to worry about.

‘We’re going to be just fine,’ she said, resting her hand where her bump wasn’t even visible yet. ‘If they don’t like us—well, that’s their problem, and we’ll deal with it if and when we have to.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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